

## KEMBLE WOOD

Tom Heyes

## Position

Kemble Wood ST 974964 lies just inside the Gloucestershire border with Wiltshire, 1.5km southwest of the village of Kemble [at the time of Domesday Kemble was in Wiltshire, being transferred to Gloucestershire in 1897. ed].

## History

Kemble is a British word meaning border, brink or edge'. The earliest mention of Kemble Wood is in two Saxon charters the first has a supposed date of AD 682<sup>2</sup>. It records a grant by Ceadwalla, king of Wessex to Malmesbury Abby of 132 hides 'on either side of the wood called Kemele'. The second has a supposed date of AD 688 and records a grant by Ceadwalla king of Wessex to Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury of land 'on both sides of a wood which is called Cemele'<sup>3</sup>. Grundy<sup>4</sup> points out that the suffix 'haga' in the name Kemeleshaga in the Saxon charter for Brokenborough<sup>5</sup>, 'refers to part of the Kemble forest'. He goes on to say 'a later charter speaks of the wood (Kemble) as having to a great extent ceased to exist'<sup>6</sup>. The Domesday Book (1086), according to Grundy

records 247 acres [1 league long and 3 furlongs wide ed] of woodland in Kemble. The subsequent history of the wood up to the 19th century has yet to be researched. The plan of the estate of Elizabeth Ann Coxo dated 1807 shows the wood boundaries as they are today, except for the large assart into the south-east corner of the wood.

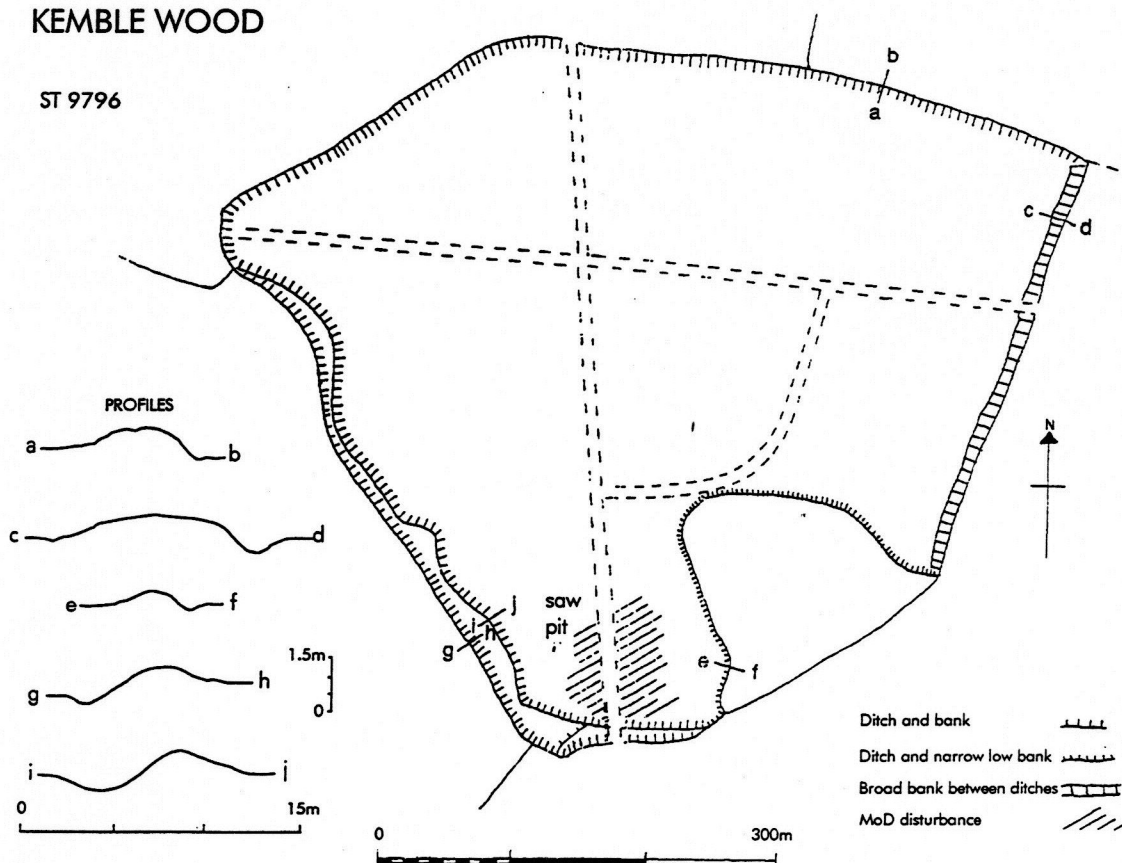
## Survey

A survey was made in 1991 of the earthworks and similar features in the wood with the permission from the estate manager Mr David Ball. Banks and ditches were surveyed using a 50m tape and prismatic compass, and five profiles were measured with 50m and 3m tapes, and spirit level.

On the west side of the wood and extending around half the southern side are two banks with external ditches shown in profiles g-h and i-j. It seems most likely that the outer of the two banks replaced the inner one at some unknown time. The distance between the two banks varies throughout their length, with the maximum width of 28m. The inner bank and ditch have a width of c7.5m, and the outer 8.5m. The ends

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of the outer bank merge with the inner bank. The inner bank has more and larger irregularities in its general outline.

The north side of the wood is marked by a bank and ditch c7.5m wide, profile a-b, broken by an entrance roughly half way along its length. Just to the west of this entrance are the remains of a stone wall. At 59m to the east of the entrance the bank is topped by a pollard oak (ie a tree formally lopped at intervals at a height of c2-4m to produce crops of wood; on woodbanks they often constitute boundary markers). One other pollard, also an oak, can be seen at the south-west corner of the wood on the outer bank. The northern bank and ditch seem to be a continuation of the inner bank and ditch of the west side.

Possibly the  
remains  
of woodman's  
collage.

The south-east corner of the wood has been grubbed out, or assarted, and given a new, irregularly shaped bank and ditch only c3.0m wide, profile e-f, marking a new boundary within the wood as it is at present. This assart has in recent times been planted with beech and cypress, so that the south-east corner of the wood would seem to have been restored more or less to the same shape it had before the assart. The beech at 1991 have diameters of c400mm.

The eastern side of the wood has a wide and fairly low bank with both an external and internal ditch, the whole up to a maximum of 12m in width, profile c-d.

In the south-west corner of the wood is a short length, c30m, of bank and ditch running from north-east to south-west. This relatively narrow bank and ditch, c4.2m, appears to have been truncated by the outer bank. It may well be the remains of a hedgebank absorbed when the wood was enlarged; it does seem to be roughly in line with a hedge which runs south-west from the new outer bank near this point.

### Comment

Kemble Wood has five different sizes of bank and ditch. In general their sinuous line is typically medieval, or earlier, as is their width. The bank marking the assart in the south-east of the wood is narrower than any others and probably later, but certainly not later than 1807. Its irregular shape suggests that it could be relatively early.

The northern and inner western banks and ditches are classic medieval or saxon woodbanks in appearance, with an external ditch designed to exclude grazing animals such as sheep or cattle which would eat the regrowing coppice stools. The size of the banks and ditches made them permanent features which prevented unscrupulous neighbours from surreptitiously stealing wood. The wood still has a good semi-natural coppice structure with very ancient coppice stools all of a similar age of, for instance, maple. At some later time the wood was extended towards the west by construction of an outer bank and ditch, at the most only 28m away. This surprisingly small increase in the size of the wood, involving the building of a substantial new bank and ditch emphasises the high value of woodland in the medieval period.

The remarkably wide bank on the east side of the wood, with ditch on either side, is of the kind associated with medieval deer parks, designed to prevent deer from escaping from the enclosure. A deer park is recorded as having once existed on the north side of the village of Kemble but there seems to be no documentary evidence of one near the wood. The stone wall on the woodbank was probably a late replacement for a fence or wood hedge.

The variety of the banks of Kemble Wood indicates a long, complicated and as yet little known history of this ancient wood

### Bibliography

For background and detail on woodland history and archaeology:

RACKHAM, Oliver. *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*. 2nd ed. London, Dent. 1990

### References

- 1 SMITH, A H. *The Place Names of Glos.* Cambridge. 1964. part 1, pp 75-76.
- 2 GRUNDY, G B. *Saxon Charters and Field Names of Glos.* Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society. 2 Parts 1935-36, p 146.
- 3 ref 2.
- 4 GRUNDY, G B. 'Ancient Woodlands of Wiltshire'. *Wilts Nat History Magazine*. Vol XLVIII, p 540
- 5 ref 2. 'Brokenborough B921-2. K460'.
- 6 ref 4. p 538.