

## Thurlbear Woods

An Inquisition Post Mortem of William de Monte Acuto in 1320 gives the extent of the Manor of Thurlbear and includes 40 acres of woodland and a farm with adjoining land. Mrs Sixsmith in her "A History of Thurlbear" states that this almost certainly refers to Church Farm (previously Simon's Court – perhaps named after Simon de Monte Acuto) and the woodland is therefore likely to be Thurlbear Wood.

The Priory of Taunton owned land in Thurlbear and there is reference in 1538 to the lease of land from the Prior of Taunton to John Carvanell (a tenant of William Portman) that included "a close lying under the wood called Priors Wood and a close called Priors Wood" (in 1855 a field just across the road from Thurlbear Church was called Priors Mead and the western part of Thurlbear Wood may have been Priors Wood).

In 1556 Sir William Portman bought the Manor of Thurlbear and other property for £ 80. He had been on a commission to value the lands belonging to Taunton Priory and appears to have done well out of the redistribution of Church Property. Thurlbear remained in this family until 1942 when the final parts of the Portman Estate were sold to the Crown to pay death duties. In 1789 the accounts of the Portman Estate show an entry for the payment of £32 to a Mr Haydon for Thurlbear Coppice Wood.

Both 19th Century Portman Estate maps show Thurlbear Wood as comprising a separate eastern and western section, the boundary between them being marked on the ground by a clear bank with old coppiced wych elm and hazel.

Various factors indicate that both areas are very ancient woodland sites: the irregular shape of the wood along the parish boundary between Thurlbear and West Hatch, the presence of ancient woodland banks, large pollarded boles and coppice stools (some estimated at 200+ years old). Other ancient woodland indicators such as wild service tree and small-leaved lime are also present.

In the late 19th Century the Portman Family lived mainly in Bryanston in Dorset and their interest in the Somerset estate appears mainly to have been for hunting and shooting. The woods were apparently in a poor state as Joseph Low was appointed as woods manager and wrote a report in 1887, following which oak standards were extensively planted in 1890 (vestiges of some very large stumps still remain from the felling of an earlier crop). Limestone quarrying and burning was a major operation in the area and there are three small, shallow quarries and an old limekiln within the reserve. This latter structure probably dates from the 19th Century and burnt coal, the use ceasing about 1900. To the north of the kiln are several earthworks, probably tracks, but their function is not clear. An old track from the larger quarry ran north along the present ride 4 to the northern boundary, exiting the Reserve through a gap in the bank.

Areas of the reserve comprise a number of old fields that have been invaded by secondary wood or overgrown by scrub. Some anthills can still be seen in places, indicating absence of ploughing.

The Forestry Commission (FC) rented the woods from the Crown Commissioners in 1947 and managed the area until the licence agreement was made with the Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation (STNC - now SWT) from 1 January 1977. STNC began negotiations to manage the reserve in 1974 following discussions with FC and the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC- now EN). The initial work was undertaken by DR. E. G. Neal (see "Woodland Ecology", 1953). The Reserve was officially opened on 16 April 1976 by the Deputy Mayor of Taunton Deane