

## The Blean Woods

*Our Forestry Consultant, Professor Julian Evans, writes:*

This lovely ancient semi-natural woodland is part of South Bishops Den Wood, which is part of the renowned Blean woods. These woods on the Downs to the north and west of Canterbury are Kent's second largest woodland complex after the Weald and have a rich history, being owned and managed by the church for centuries, and a rich wildlife. Some of the woods are the home of the rare heath fritillary, but their more general significance is evidenced by The Blean Woods National Nature Reserve which, covering 495 ha, is the largest broadleaved woodland in conservation management in south-east England. This blend of history stretching back to medieval times and biodiversity value is what makes The Blean special.

**The soils of The Blean** are not particularly fertile and many woods are on heavy acidic clays (London Clay) though a few have drift material of silts or clay-with-flints. Indeed, this poor quality is probably why the woodlands are still so extensive: even medieval farmers knew they were not worth clearing and trying to cultivate!

**The Blean's wildlife** has attracted much interest and many surveys. Tree cover is dominated by oaks and hornbeam, with plenty of birch and hazel, but beech often confined to ancient hedgerows. Sweet chestnut coppice, and as standard trees, are also frequent. The ground flora has been much studied and in The Blean 'idyllic' woods can be found with carpets of bluebells following wood anemone, primroses, and ladies smock suffused with plenty of violets. Where shade is heavy honeysuckle, hawthorn and bramble predominate. Of note in The Blean are wood spurge and pendulous sedge. The very rare heath fritillary butterfly in The Blean has led to much work providing wide rides and corridors of suitable sunlit vegetation to connect coppice cants to help maintain the populations of this 'weak flyer'. Other fritillary species have been seen as well as butterfly and moth species one associates with coppices, glades and rides of ancient woodlands. Birdlife is particularly rich, even rarities such as hawfinch and golden oriole are known to breed from time to time.

**Managing The Blean Woods** has gone on for centuries for timber and coppice products, especially for fuel (faggots) and tanbark, but it is perhaps coppicing which is now crucial to maintaining the rich diversity of wildlife long associated with The Blean. Indeed, to own a wood in The Blean must mean giving consideration to maintaining or re-instating this traditional form of woodland management. Fortunately it is a job that can be done with hand tools and over time and so is amenable to the small owner.

Even a brief note about The Blean must not omit **archaeology and the long and varied history of human activity** from Stone Age, to Roman, to medieval, up to the present day. A history that is continuing as many people enjoy visits for wildlife, recreation, local archaeology, traditional rural crafts, or just experiencing the timelessness of an ancient woodland that somehow has always been around and, hopefully, always will be.

The Blean Initiative [blean.initiative@canterbury.gov.uk](mailto:blean.initiative@canterbury.gov.uk) brings all these interest together and is a source of incredibly useful information.