

Historic Pathways

Environmental Indicators of the age of paths

There are many ways of exploring the age and history of footpaths, including the use of archaeological and documentary evidence and old maps. Clues can also be derived from studying the vegetation that grows alongside the paths. At its best this is a very complex activity, but a simple start can be made by observing the trees, hedges and smaller plants.

Here are a few things to look out for, remembering that they do not by themselves indicate the existence of an old pathway but suggest that the possibility is worth investigating. What you see will probably raise more questions than give you answers, but there are many sources available on line and elsewhere to help refine your search.

Trees

Veteran trees, for example English oaks, are characterised by girths of 3m or more measured at 1.5m. Depending on where they grow, trees of this size can be anything from 100 – 250 years. The larger the girth the older the tree. An oak of 5.5m could be 300- 400 years old. Some oaks in Windsor Great Park have lived to 1,000 years. The correlation of girth with possible age depends mainly on growing conditions and to a lesser extent on species. Charts giving more information can be found by visiting www.wdvta.org.uk/pdf/Estimating-the-age-of-trees.pdf



English oak English oak



sweet chestnut

In times gone by trees provided surrounding communities with essentials for life such as wood for fuel and tools and timber for homes. Trees were coppiced (cut to the ground) or pollarded (cut to a height of about 2-3m), growing again and again to meet these needs. These coppices and pollards can be very old and are frequently found along footpaths.



beech coppice



beech pollard

Hedges

A hedge is any boundary line of shrubs over 20m long and less than five metres wide. It is species rich if it has five or more woody species of trees and shrubs. These include dogwood, hawthorn, field maple, hazel, spindle, wych elm, blackthorn. Species rich hedgerows may indicate antiquity especially if they contain maiden, coppiced or pollarded veteran trees. Note that some species rich hedges have been newly planted, so other evidence would be needed to be sure if this is an old hedgerow. Species poor hedgerows containing shrubs such as blackthorn, hawthorn, elder and field maple may date from the time of the Inclosure Acts in 18th and 19th century. These hedges would be unlikely to contain veteran trees.



Plants

The presence of a large number of ancient woodland flora at the base of hedges can be further evidence of antiquity, even if in the hedge there are fewer woody species. This could suggest that these are relics of long established ancient secondary woodland, possibly dating back to a period before 1600 and the beginning of enclosures. Lists of ancient woodland species include bluebell, wood anemone, Lords-and-ladies, enchanter's nightshade, pignut, foxglove, herb robert, yellow pimpernel, wood sorrel, primrose, early purple orchid, dog's mercury, Solomon's seal, sweet woodruff. All these plants have poor seed disposal patterns and so will have remained undisturbed for many years. The more species there are, the better chance the hedgerow is old.



wood anemones



English bluebells