

From the *Echo*

Planting policy at Outwoods is wrong

To the Editor
Sir,—In last week's *Echo* it was reported that the Outwoods Management Committee had expressed concern at the amount of damage being caused to dry stone boundary walls and, to a lesser extent, at the number of fires started during the summer in the Outwoods and Bluebell Wood.

The many local people who treasure this area of woodland would, I am sure, likewise wish to express their concern at these stupid and selfish acts, but there is another type of damage which I would like to draw attention to which may not be as apparent at the moment but which, nevertheless, is destroying the character and much of the interest in these woods.

I refer to the continued planting of conifers in the open portions of the Outwoods.

Whatever justification there may be, on economic grounds, for planting coniferous trees in Forestry Commission or private woodland, there seems no really valid reasons for adopting such a policy in public amenity areas such as the Outwoods and it is extremely important that this practice is halted at once.

Woodlands consist, or should consist, of far more than just trees: an old oak wood (the natural vegetational climax in this part of Britain) would, in fact, support over a thousand different species of organisms, a fascinating community of interrelated and associated plants and animals.

Many of your readers will remember the Outwoods prior to the greater part of the southern section being clear-felled over 20 years ago.

Like myself, they will doubtless remember the hosts of wild flowers: the blue haze of countless bluebells; the pinky white patches of wood anemone; the small yellow star of wood pimpernel; the delicate, tiny white wood sorrel, and sturdy colonies of yellow archangel—and hosts of others.

Today these have largely disappeared, not as a result of vandalism in the usual sense but as a result of the widespread planting of blocks of conifers, and the woodland floor which a quarter of century ago was so rich in mosses, liverworts, ferns and woodland herbs is now largely bare but for a thickening carpet of pine/spruce needles.

Instead of the former flowery, sunlit glades we now have acres of uniformly dark uninteresting plantation where, because of the acidic nature of the decomposing needles and the small degree of light penetration, few other species can survive.

Much of this planting was done before the wood was bought and presented to the people of Loughborough by Alderman George Bowler and Mr. Alan Moss and so, therefore, cannot be blamed on present management, but why such an obviously undesirable practice should be continued when the contrast of the two types of woodland exists side by side for all to see is beyond comprehension.

The Outwoods, together with Beacon Hill and Hangingstone Rocks, is scheduled under Section 23 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act as a Site of Special Scientific Importance on account of the special nature and variety of the wildlife occurring there.

At the Outwoods much of the interest diminished with the felling of the old oak trees, but even so the right kind of management could, over the years, have restored much of this. Sadly this has not been the case, for during 20 years of public ownership a further deterioration has taken place and can be expected to continue as the recently planted conifers grow and eventually extinguish the bluebells, etc.

Only one or two English counties are more poorly wooded than Leicestershire; even so, last century the great naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace, who resided for a time in Leicestershire and travelled extensively to some of the richest wildlife regions of the world, remarked in one of his books that he saw no finer sight anywhere on his travels than that of our Leicestershire bluebell woods in May!

During the present century, especially during the two World Wars, our local woodlands have suffered greatly as a result of clear-felling and subsequent re-planting with alien species. Not only have we in consequence lost the great proportion of our older trees but also much of the rich fauna and flora associated with them, and formerly so typical of the Charnwood scene.

During this European Conservation Year local conservation interests could be served enormously if those in charge of our woodlands planted more indigenous trees and less or no aliens, for the former have, as indicated, a wealth of associated species; the latter invariably few.

It is not necessarily good conservation practice to plant a tree or trees. It all depends on what you plant and where you plant it.

Yours etc.,

P. H. GAMBLE,
Chairman,

Loughborough Naturalists' Club,
96 Meeting-street,
Quorn.