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Medieval Woodland in Barkway

In this area we have a number of ancient woods. They are usually characterised by having within their precincts plants such as bluebells, dog mercury, and wild garlic.

In medieval times woodland was regarded as a valuable asset. It contained timber for building, and small wood for poles, hurdles, and most importantly for domestic fuel. The first two were likely to have been obtained from coppicing small trees such as hazel. They would be cut to ground level, and then allowed to regrow providing long straight lengths. So called coppice stools of hazel in woods such as Rokey Wood are very common.

Because of their importance woods were surrounded by ditches and hedge banks on the outside to deter predation by deer and others. There are numerous examples of remaining ancient ditches at woodland edges.

Large areas of the country were given over to strip farming. This form of cultivation was carried on in most places until enclosure. This commenced in Barkway in 1811. Post enclosure field boundaries can be seen now as straight, and hedged by mostly hawthorn. However old field boundaries following their original courses can still be found.

Fields ploughed in medieval times and earlier would have been by teams of oxen, and later horses. Traditionally ploughing proceeded to follow a reverse capital "S" shape. This was to overcome the difficulty of turning the teams at the end of the row. So the plough would start to follow a curve when approaching the headland so that a smooth progression could be followed before going on.

These "S" shaped lengths were normally a furlong (200 yards) and known as selions. The western edge of Rokey Wood provides a perfect example of the length and shape of a selion furlong.

Unploughed paths for access were left at random amongst the strips known as baulks. That name has survived for the land beyond the village hall.

As a result of the ploughing, headlands tended to develop as substantial banks of earth.

There are many examples in our area of fields which at first sight appear to be straight edged, but on closer observation the ancient shapes can be detected.

Springs in both Rokey Wood and nearby Sallow Wood rise from the underlying chalk to eventually flow down to form the river Quin. English chalk streams are a rare and vital part of the ecosystem.