The Royal Hunting Forest

Rockingham Forest was a Royal Hunting Forest – an area of prime hunting land which was reserved for the king and his entourage. The boundaries were determined by the king’s commissioners in a ‘perambulation’ (literally, a walk around) recorded in a document describing natural or man-made features in the landscape which defined the boundary, for example, a ditch, a track, a hedge-line, a stream, or a distance between two landscape features.

The earliest known written ‘perambulation’ of Rockingham Forest was recorded in 1286 under Edward I, though the forest area had been established by William I over 200 years before that.

The forest stretched from the bridge at Stamford in the north, to the bridge at Northampton in the south – a distance of 33 miles - and from the River Nene in the east to the River Welland and the Maidwell stream on the north-west – an average breadth of 7 ½ miles. The shape and size of the forest changed with later perambulations, the last of which was in 1641.

Cliffe Bailiwick

Rockingham Forest was divided into three administrative areas known as ‘bailiwicks’: Rockingham, Brigstock and Cliffe.

Cliffe Bailiwick was centred around King’s Cliffe and was separated from the other two bailiwicks by a broad sweep of four villages not included in the forest area – Blatherwycke, Bulwick, Deenethorpe and Benefield.

Cliffe Bailiwick was made up of several ‘walks’: Westhay, Morehay, Sulehay and Shortwood. A ‘walk’ was an area that could be covered by one ‘forester’ or gamekeeper. This would have included woods, ridings, enclosed grazing areas for the deer and open fields for cultivation.

Twelve villages in or near the bailiwick all shared rights of common in the forest:

King’s Cliffe, Apethorpe, Duddington, Fotheringhay, Nassington, Wood Newton, Benefield, Bulwick, Deenethorpe, Glapthorn and Southwick

The Royal Deer Park known as Cliffe Park

The royal deer park known as ‘Cliffe Park’ was first recorded in the early 13th century. It contained 1,854 acres, its boundaries being partly walled and partly fenced round. Deer were taken into the Park to be available for the King and his royal hunting parties during their stays at ‘the King’s House’, a hunting lodge in King’s Cliffe.

It was customary to lop the twigs from the oaks and other trees to feed the deer in winter. This fodder was called ‘derefal wode’ or ‘browse’. The amount cut depended on the season; in 1488, for example, Lord Wells, as Master Forester, had 26 loads of derefal cut in Cliffe
Park but only 16 loads in 1489. Records from that time show that there were considerable numbers of deer in Cliffe Park.

The palings around Cliffe Park can be seen clearly on Christopher Saxton’s map of 1576 (below).

In 1592, the park was granted by Queen Elizabeth I to the Earl of Essex and, on his disgrace, to William Lord Burghley in 1598 who ‘disparked’ the area and divided it into numerous fields.

Much of the southern half of the former park area was used to create an airfield during World War II – remnants of which can still be seen south of the road running from Wansford to King’s Cliffe.

**Forest Law**

Within the royal hunting forest, ‘Forest Law’ applied. Under this law, the hunting of certain animals was forbidden to everyone except the King and his hunting party. These were known as ‘**Beasts of the Hunt**’ - red deer, wolf, wild boar and hare.
These restrictions did not apply to 'Beasts of the chase and warren': fallow deer, roe deer, fox and martin as well as wild cats, rabbits and game birds.

Archbishops, bishops, earls and barons passing through a royal forest were entitled to take one or two head of game but only in the sight of the king’s forester and not furtively!

The law also forbade the felling of any tree – in whole or in part - for any purpose, without the king’s permission. Dead or naturally fallen wood could be gathered.

Royal grants of ‘venison’ (a term which covered any beasts of the hunt) and timber were recorded in the court rolls, for example:

In 1249 Henry 111 gave five bucks and ten does to the Earl of Derby and eight does to the Abbot of Westminster.

In 1488 it was recorded that 12 acres of wood and ‘underwood’ had been cleared in Hamerton Dale and the proceeds given by Henry VI for the repair and rebuilding of the church of King’s Cliffe and the mill. (This was some years after a serious fire had destroyed many dwellings and ‘the King’s House’.)
Villages lying within the forest limits were granted ‘rights of common’ not enjoyed by settlements outside the forest. Rights of common were:

> ‘estovers’ – the right to gather dead and fallen wood for fuel, repair or construction

> ‘agistement’ – the right to graze cattle in the forest at certain times of year, and sheep to graze on pasture

> ‘pannage’ – the right to let pigs graze on beechmast and acorns in the autumn.

Grazing rights still had to be paid for with a small fee per animal grazed. All cattle had to be branded with their owner’s mark so that numbers of grazing animals could be checked and trespassers identified.

Certain animals were not permitted to be grazed in the forest: goats because of their strong smell which was thought to taint the ground, putting the deer off their food and the dogs off their scent; and geese who were just too noisy and might disturb the deer!

In 1229, however, men of King’s Cliffe and the neighbouring villages appealed to Henry III at Stamford to grant them special permission to turn their goats out in the forest of Cliffe ‘according to ancient custom’. Without this, the men claimed, they ‘could not support their lives’. The King granted their request and decreed the goats could be grazed in the more open parts of the woods and wherever they could do the least injury to the forest.

Grazing and passage through the forest was restricted at certain times of the year. In ‘Fence Month’ from 9 June to 9 July, when pregnant female deer were near to giving birth, a special levy was imposed to deter people from passing through the forest with carts or packhorses which might disturb the peace.
Grazing rights were curtailed during the winter months, when the limited amount of fodder was needed by the deer.

No greyhounds could be kept and other dogs such as mastiffs had to be 'lawed' by have their front claws removed to prevent damage to the deer.

**Offences** against the ‘vert’ or greenery of the forest were:

> ‘**assarting**’ – clearing woodland for pasture or cultivation

> ‘**wasting**’ – destroying the woodland undergrowth which provided shelter for deer

> ‘**purpresture**’ – enclosing land or building in the forest

Penalties were severe in the early days of Forest Law, but in the first Forest Charter of 1217, Henry III decreed that ‘no man shall henceforth lose life nor limb’ in punishment for an offence.

Forest Law began to decline in the 14th century as Plague decimated the working population and many landowners turned their land over to sheep grazing.

Acts of Disafforestation in 1792 and 1832 brought about the end of Forest Law.

### Officials of the Royal Hunting Forest

**The Chief Justice of Forests** was appointed by the King himself and was a high-ranking noble responsible for a large region. From 1238, Rockingham Forest came under the control of the Chief Justice for all royal forests south of the River Trent.

**Each forest had a hierarchy of local officials:**

**The Warden** (also called ‘Chief Forester’, ‘steward’, ‘constable’ or ‘bailiff’) was responsible for the game and woodland in a particular forest. In Rockingham Forest, the Warden’s residence was Rockingham Castle. The Warden held a privileged position and was the only person allowed to carry a bow and arrows in the forest.

**The Foresters** who were appointed from among the local landowners and responsible to the Warden. Their symbol of office was a horn. Their job was to patrol the forest, (usually 4 on foot and 1 on horseback), seeking out and arresting poachers and miscreants, and collecting forest taxes. Inevitably, they were unpopular! The Foresters were subject to penalties if they failed to carry out their duties, though court records show that they themselves were not above breaking the law!

**There were other, unpaid, forest officials:**

**Agisters** (usually 4) who collected and recorded the grazing fees.
Regarders (usually 12) elected from among the local gentry, whose job was to carry out a
genral inspection of the forest every three years. They looked for any encroachment or
clearing of the forest, anyone having traps or weapons, or dogs that had not been ‘lawed’.

Verderers, also elected from among the local gentry, but answerable to the King. Their
symbol of office was an axe. Verderers investigated breaches of Forest Law, attending the
scene of the crime with the Forester to record what they found there and taking evidence.
Representatives of the four nearest villages were required to attend and state what they
knew about the crime.

Offenders against Forest Law were first brought before the local Court of Attachment (later
called the ‘Swanimote’) which sat every six weeks. The Verderer and Forest attended and
set out the evidence. Offenders were then ‘attached’ on bail or surety, or sometimes
imprisoned, to appear at the next Eyre Court.

The Chief Justice of Forests presided over the main forest court, the Eyre, which was
convened every seven years though in fact it sat very infrequently. So, offenders could
have a very long wait, and some offenders died before they could come to trial.

Royal hunting lodges

William the Conqueror built Rockingham Castle between 1066 and 1086. Royal hunting
lodges were built later at Brigstock, Geddington and King’s Cliffe.

The royal hunting lodge at King’s Cliffe (‘the King’s House’) was probably situated south of
the church, though nothing remains of it today. It was used from William II’s time (late 11th
century) and several charters of Henry I were dated here. King John, perhaps most
famously, stayed at King’s Cliffe four times. Henry III also paid several visits during his long
reign, in 1229, 1252 and finally in 1274. In that same year, Edward I came to King’s Cliffe,
and again in 1301. The last recorded royal visit was by Edward III in 1330.

The King’s House declined into disrepair, or ‘waste’, and was eventually destroyed in 1462 by
a great fire which burnt many village dwellings.

Royal hunting parties

Elaborate preparations would have been made for each royal hunting trip. Rooms, stabling
and kennels were made ready and quantities of food and drink brought in - enough for the
entire royal entourage. In 1250, for example, six tuns of wine were ordered to be sent to
King’s Cliffe to be stored ‘safely in the King’s cellars’.
The main kennel for Rockingham Forest was at Weldon.

Five kinds of dog were used for hunting, each having a different attribute:
> the greyhound for its excellent sight,
> the mastiff for its power and weight,
> the limehound for its scent,
> the brache and the smaller berculet were used for their speed.

The King’s hunting party would include
> huntsmen equipped with bows and arrows,
> a number of pages,
> a lymer or harbourer running with the limehound,
> a ventrer in control of the greyhounds,
> a berner who looked after the running hounds.

Huntsmen were paid 7½d a day, the dog handlers 2d a day, pages 1d and the dogs themselves ½d! [2d = slightly less than 1p]
In 1493 a court was held at Collyweston at which all owners of cross-bows in Rockingham Forest were required to be present – thirty such nobles and yeomen attended. They were forbidden to carry a cross-bow within the forest area after October 8 1493 upon penalty of £10 to the Crown for every offence and forfeit of the weapon to the Lord Keeper of the Forest. Soon afterwards, cross-bows were outlawed altogether except for use by men of considerable property who were licensed by the King.

Rabbits provided an essential part of the diet in medieaval times and Warrens were established and overseen by appointed Warreners.
King John hunting – who knows where, but possibly at King’s Cliffe!