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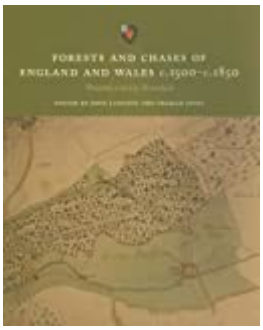

John Langton, Graham Jones, eds. *Forests and Chases of England and Wales, c. 1500 to c. 1850: Towards a Survey and Analysis.* Oxford: St John's College Research Centre, 2005. xviii + 118 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-0-9544975-2-1.

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Proposal for Research on Forests

Forests and Chases of England and Wales arises from a research proposal recently submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the United Kingdom to determine the survival and significance of forests and chases in England and Wales from documents, maps and fieldwork. After a digest of the submission, the volume includes revised versions of papers presented at a forum held at Oxford in 2005, summaries of two presentations of electronic mapping, and extracts from a discussion session structured around four potential user groups. Historians, geographers, archaeologists, ecologists and environmental managers all made contributions in a wide-ranging interdisciplinary project.

In the preliminary pages, the research proposal is outlined. A convincing case is made–at least to this reviewer–of the value of what is suggested. Figure 1 shows the forests and chases that are currently known and demonstrates their very wide distribution across England and Wales: at their greatest extent, they are thought to have covered between one- and two-thirds of a number of historic counties. After disafforestation, large areas of common land remained together with forest names, deer and fox hunting, poaching, forest courts and offices, and commoners' rights and claims of forest rights. The proposal stresses how much there is to find out about these forest areas and, after a non-technical summary, lists detailed aims and objectives. This involves some repetition and it might have been more satisfactory for the purposes of the volume to have condensed the proposal to avoid making the same point twice.

The bulk of the volume contains fifteen chapters outlining suggested areas of research. John Langton outlines the history and historiography of forests, and Graham Jones describes the aim to compile a database of every known forest and chase. This database would contain such information as the forest's location and extent, longevity, infrastructure, franchises, bureaucracy and the location of sources; it would also form the basis of an interactive atlas and gazetteer. Then follow chapters on the Parliamentary Surveys (David Fletcher), historic mapping (Elizabeth Baigent), parliament, peers and legislation (Ruth Paley), customary rights (Sylvia Pinches), encroachments (Paul Coones), forest courts (Graham Jones), crime (Carl Griffin), religious nonconformity

(Marie Rowlands), gypsies and travelers (David Smith), ownership and ecological change (Caroline Cheesman), hunting (Mandy de Belin), fuel (Paul Warde) and scientific forestry (Judith Tsouvalis). A further two chapters outline the results of historic mapping of Bringewood Chase and Rockingham Forest.

The book demonstrates clearly the breadth of interest in forest areas and the wealth of opportunities for further study and some of the chapters are valuable summaries of the current state of knowledge about forests. Those by Baigent, Pinches, Jones, Griffin and Smith will no doubt be used as sources by researchers in years to come. However, the quality is not consistent across the volume. Some other chapters are less well written and put together, and while they outline worthwhile areas for future research they have less to offer to the general reader today. Some pieces use technical language and are not clear to the non-expert.

John Langton and Graham Jones have left the reader in no doubt that there is much to learn about forests from the sixteenth century onwards. It is a huge disappointment that the ESRC did not award funding for this five-year program of research, and Langton and Jones should be encouraged to continue with their efforts to bring together researchers from a wide variety of backgrounds to work on this hitherto neglected area of England and Wales.

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