

Introducing

Jonathan Mullard
Author of Forgotten Forests



I have combined a passion for the natural environment with a career in conservation and town and country planning.

In the early 1980s I worked alongside Max Nicholson, the pioneer ornithologist and environmentalist, on developing an urban woodland strategy for London. This involved setting up a project in Crystal Palace to save a fragment of the Great North Wood.

Along with experience of growing up in Shropshire and researching the lost Forest of Morfe, it started an interest in forgotten forests and their remains. I am also the author of three books on Wales published in the Collins New Naturalist series.

How did your interest in nature start - were you influenced by anyone or an incident in particular when you were younger, or did it evolve over time?

I grew up in the 1960s in what was then rural Shropshire and spent most of my free time exploring the fields and woods around my home, either alone or with friends. It was a natural progression to find out more about the plants and animals I came across and I started keeping nature diaries – now sadly lost. A childhood similar to a lot of people at the time, but for me the interest in the natural world got stronger as I became older, not weaker. So, to answer your question, my interest evolved over time.

To be in a public sector environment then to transition into being an author is quite a challenge, was it a natural self-led progression or were you asked to write by a publisher?

A bit of both really. I had a track record of writing about archaeology and nature for various publications and, indeed, all of my jobs involved researching and producing reports and documents, including management plans for countryside designations. Because of this background I found my first book, *Gower*, which was published in the Collins New Naturalist series, relatively straightforward to write and the response led to two further books, *Brecon Beacons* and *Pembrokeshire*. All three, which I wrote while still in full-time posts, have a strong archaeology and history focus, alongside the natural history.

You have written extensively on different aspects of nature - what drew you to write about forests?

Simply, I did not think the true story of forests in Britain and Ireland had been told – especially the impact of wars and invasions in Ireland and Wales. Biologists, archaeologists and historians had written about different elements but there were significant gaps from my perspective and no one had previously brought the various strands together. Over the years I also encountered three lost forests, the Forest of Morfe in Shropshire, the Great North Wood in South London and the Jed Forest in the Scottish Borders. All are now represented either by individual surviving trees, or small areas of woodland. I used these as the ‘baseline’ for my book.

Using anecdotes is a refreshing and unique way to write about forgotten forests - was this a difficult aspect of research, checking facts and connecting themes etc?

Not at all, as I had the approach clear in my mind from the beginning and I wanted to make the narrative engaging so that it connected with the average reader – if there is such a thing! The human brain uses narratives to process information, and create meaning, and therefore, for me at least, anecdotes are an important part of producing an involving story.

The writing of the fisheries biologist, Daniel Pauly, about shifting baseline syndrome was also a key element. Pauly is very clear that if you want to fight the loss of memory and knowledge about the past, you have to rely on information which is often viewed, wrongly, as anecdotal. We therefore need to abandon the idea that the past is a provider of anecdotes and the present is a provider of knowledge.

My book, incorporating both anecdotes and knowledge, aims to push our mental baseline of forests in Britain and Ireland back, to increase awareness of past losses and future opportunities.

You use people and forests in a symbiotic way in the book - which came first, the historical figure/time frame or you knew about the forest and matched the prominent figure?

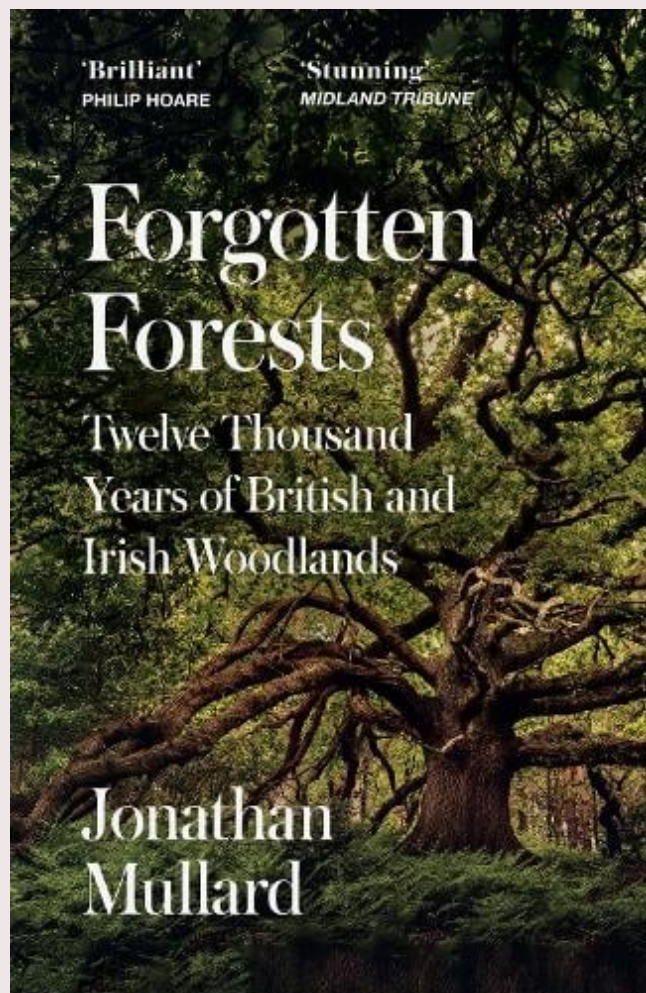
Both elements actually came together quite easily, as I cross-referenced between archaeological, historical and biological sources of information; moving through the timescale from millennia to centuries and then individual years. There were some choice finds though, including the writing of King Alfred, who referred to the Anglo-Saxon approach to forests in his preface to St Augustine's Soliloquies, as part of a religious philosophical discussion.

Was it difficult to edit out some information when writing this book - is there anything you thought in hindsight you would have liked to have kept in?

My publisher set a very tight word limit, which I had to work to, so, yes, there were elements of the story that were condensed. If there had been space, I would have included more on the Iron Age, especially the construction of hillforts and the amount of timber used in their defences. But the Romans were also an Iron Age culture and I covered their impacts on the forests in some detail, including the building of their forts.

7. What is next on your horizon for writing?

I am currently exploring a number of options with my publisher, so want to keep our conversations confidential at present!



Find out more about Jonathan <http://www.linkedin.com/in/jonathanmullard>

Thank you Jonathan!