

Gap news

Tree Fodder

Part 1 - Is the past the key to the Future?

I was making a lot of noise - loud cracks and crashing sounds, pollarding small Turkey oaks in Windsor deer park this summer. By the time a second or third tree had been cut a crescent of bright-eyed, expectant red deer had formed, eagerly waiting to browse the leaves and small twigs. Presumably instinct told them, especially the old lead doe that the crashing and cracking sounds meant they were in for a special dietary treat.

I have watched cattle voraciously eating fresh, partially green, autumn leaves blown down in high winds - they clearly know that they are good to eat.

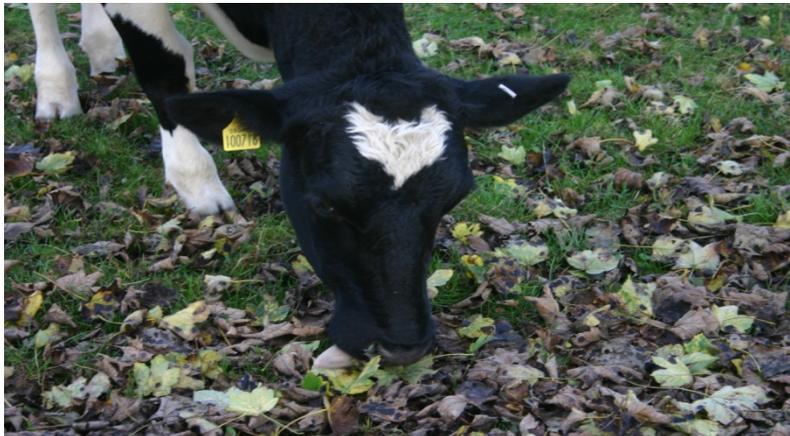


Photo 1 Caption: Cow actively selecting fallen sycamore leaves.

I know of another independent farmer who has also watched his cows eating fallen sycamore leaves.

However, there are other factors that lead animals to eat certain plants - we now know that they seek out some sallows for self-medication. Maybe they learn this from their mother or maybe they just have different likes and dislikes. Every animal is an individual and is presumably no different from humans in having food preferences and needs.

Like me, early man surely watched wild or his own domesticated animals browsing trees and shrubs in full leaf on fallen trees and limbs or twigs and bark in the winter. He would have had the idea to use his hands or stone or flint axes to break or cut small twigs and branches out of reach. Soon people would be cutting and drying the branches and leaves and storing them as food for hard times, such as droughts or hard winters. So perhaps began the tradition of cutting tree fodder or tree hay which may be one of our oldest farming practices and probably went hand in hand with the domestication of animals. This must have been thousands of years before we were able to do the same with hay, which had to wait for technology to catch up ie metal tools to cut grass.



Photo 1 Caption: A Neolithic oak pollard found in gravel workings by the Trent near Nottingham. It has been carbon dated at 3,400 years. Notice the type of cuts and the height of the bolling - this led Norman Lewis (who brought this subfossil to my attention) and me to rule out beaver work.

Let us explore why pollards were traditionally used for leaf fodder. Animals appear to take every opportunity to browse tree leaves especially at times of the year when the sward loses its quality for grazing. The idea that even fantastic herb rich meadows let alone the destroyed meadows, called improved grasslands, provide animals with all the minerals and nutrients and especially trace elements that they need throughout the year and over their lifespan must be a huge assumption. If they are not getting the nutrition that they need then based on 'you are what you eat' this has implications for us too at the end of the food chain.

In the "great summer heats" like 1976 when all the meadows had burned off, especially improved grassland, I watched farmers in Brittany cutting the only remaining greenery to feed their animals - branches with leaves. However, this is now the exception as pollarding for fodder across the European continent appears to be in steep decline. In parts of the Lake District, ash pollards are still cut in the winter months to give the bark and buds to the sheep. Otherwise it is increasingly confined to a few small areas in remote regions, in poorer countries or in mountainous areas where the animals are housed for long periods during the winter months. In the UK and other fertile lowland areas it may have died out with the coming of turnips.

Pollarding and tree fodder has often been associated with our poorest communal landscapes, our common land. It is no accident that London is still fortunately ringed by pollard commons as apparently Hornbeam faggots were prized by the bakers of London for producing the best bread. Gorse faggots too were presumably coming mainly from such 'heathland' areas and were also an important source of fuel for 'firing up' the ovens.

Our heathland 'wastes' would be a good place to start re-establishing pollards as part of the grazed landscape. I cheer every time I see cows and horses on any sort of heathland.



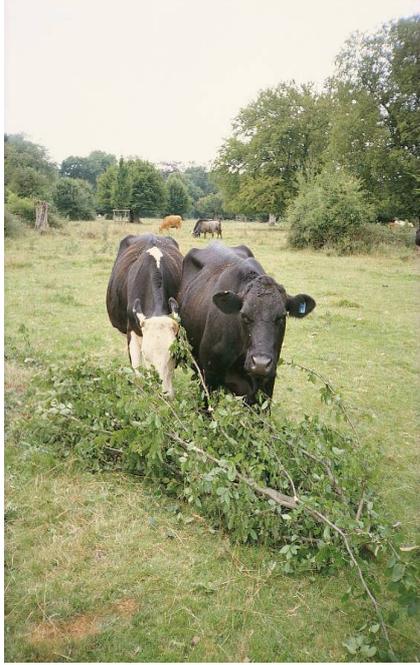
[Photo 2 - Feeding organic cows a whole range of fresh tree fodder -on the second visit they all ran to the gate for their "little treats"!]



[Photo 3 - Old cow in the New Forest entry sallow - is she self-medicating or just a red opportunity?]



[Photo 4 - Old sallows beside a stone circle near Braemar. Presumably the stone circle was used to confine animals. Were the sallows used for animal medication?]



[Photo 5 - Hatfield Forest - cows eating freshly cut "lop and top" from a re-cut Hornbeam pollard. Presumably this was dried and stored to feed animals in the winter months.]

All the questions of cutting tree fodder from existing trees or creating new pollards - the how, when, what species, will be dealt with in depth in the next issue as well as the descriptions of the tree fodder work carried out at Knepp Estate in July 2009 because hopefully this article will generate some interest.

Is it time to think again? Shouldn't we be rediscovering the benefits of pollards not only for their essential contribution to sustainable farming and especially healthy and productive soils, but also for being capital assets creating beautiful landscapes, maintaining biodiversity and offsetting carbon to reduce climate change. And secondarily trees provide many products such as timber, fuel, fruits, and shade especially on low productive soils. Surely it's a win-win to pollard trees to offset growing concerns about how we are going to maintain long term, sustainable agriculture as oil begins to run out and the constant and increasing degradation and depletion of our irreplaceable soils.

Perhaps the past is the key to the future.

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