

The Forest of Knaresborough

The Forest was not a continuous stretch of woodland, but a hunting area subject to special rules for conserving game. Its inhabitants lived in villages and hamlets surrounded by meadows and arable land. The Forest was at first divided into three "constabularies": Thruscross, which included the hamlets of Bramley, Darley, Hill, Holme, Menwith, Padside and Thornthwaite; Clint, with the five hamlets of Birstwith, Fearnhill, Felliscliffe, Hampsthwaite and Rowden; and Killinghall, with the hamlets of Beckwith, Rossett and Bilton-with-Harrogate. The hamlets later became eleven separate constabularies: Beckwith with Rossett, Bilton-with-Harrogate, Birstwith, Clifton, Clint, Felliscliffe, Hampsthwaite, Killinghall, Menwith with Darley, Thruscross and Timble.



Within the forest there were two areas, Haverah Park and Bilton Park, which were fenced off as deer parks, allowing game to enter but not to escape. The remains of a hunting lodge, known as John O'Gaunt's Castle, can still be seen in Haverah Park. In 1380 John of Gaunt ordered the building of a hunting lodge in Bilton Park: the building, remodelled in the 19th century, is now known as Bilton Hall.

The inhabitants of the Royal Forest were subject to a body of law which forbade hunting of deer and hunting with bows and arrows or hounds, and provided for fines for cutting down trees. They were in effect tenants of the Crown, but they had security of tenure and could transfer their rights. Provided that they did not interfere with the king's hunting, they were free to make their livings in

the Forest. Economic activity included farming, milling and other industries such as mining. There are records of iron forging from 1206, but the industry declined in the 14th century because the wood which supplied the forges was used up.



Decline

By Tudor times the Forest had outlived its original purpose, and English monarchs no longer spent their time hunting. The Forest had been stripped of many of its trees, largely for the sale of timber for the iron smelting industry. A survey in 1604 found only 410 standing trees left in Haverah Park. James I was interested in sport and discouraged disafforestation, but his son Charles I did not. In 1628 Charles I sold off both Bilton Park and Haverah Park.[1] The town of Harrogate grew within the Forest in the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1770 an Act of Enclosure divided the Forest. Some of the Forest remained in the hands of the Duchy, some was allocated to tithe owners, and an area of Harrogate was allocated as a public open space known as The Stray. The visible remains of the Forest include a large number of boundary stones erected during the last perambulation of the boundaries conducted in 1767. Wikki, 2022.