The Royal Forest of Dean is in England’s West Midlands between the rivers Severn and Wye.

Silver and brass bands, a relic of the days when thousands of men worked the coal seams, are still the music of the forest.

Foresters born here have ancient rights. First the right to keep sheep in the unfenced forest, the second to mine coal or minerals working as free miners.

Gerald works this mine alone. His right to mine goes back to antiquity, but was enshrined in law in the thirteenth century by the English King Edward I when foresters served him well during his wars with the Scots.

Gerald’s mine is deep in the forest near two ponds that are a haven for wild life.

A man has to be born here in the forest and has to have worked in a mine for a year and a day before he can become a free miner. Fifty years ago there were 5,000 coal miners working in the forest. Today Gerald is one of the last free miners still earning his living this way.

His one-man mine has become a tourist attraction.

Visitors are allowed access to all parts of the forest. In the most visited parts, the wildlife is rare and wild plants increasingly threatened.

From a small town in the heart of the Dean, a UK government agency, ‘Forest Enterprise’, administers the Royal Forest. It continues a thousand year old tradition of central government protection.

From the time of the Norman Conquest in the 11th century the forest was reserved as a hunting ground for Kings. And the revenues from iron mined and smelted here went into their coffers. As England developed into a naval power, the oak assumed strategic value. In 1633 Charles I created the post of Deputy Surveyor to take overall charge of the forest. Since then there has been an unbroken line of 25 royal Deputy Surveyors.

Rob Guest, Deputy Surveyor

Today we manage the forest for a whole range of purposes and consequently the management is very much more complex perhaps than it used to be. So that we still do produced timber and it’s still a very important aspect of our work, the, the revenue it generates helps to pay for the other aspects, equally so we are involved very actively managing the forest for conservations purposes. That requires quite a lot of balancing up of the objectives for where we will manage for timber or how we will manage the woodlands and so on, in order to optimize the bio diversity of the forest.

We are also a very, very big visitor attraction here.
NARRATOR
In autumn people come to collect mushrooms. The forest is home to a huge variety of fungi. Some edible most not.

The group are given a quick lesson by a local expert in what is safe to eat.

Jack Marriot
To properly identify a fungus you’ve got to get the base of the stem, you’ve got to dig down into the soil with your knife.

I hope that you’ve all got knives with you. It’s very important to have, you see in this case it’s got a bulbous bottom to the stem here.

This by the way is a very, very good one to eat, and is virtually unmistakable for anything else. And it’s got a ring here which is very distinguished in its appearance and it’s very good to eat.

Well this is a kind of bonny country, we’d better look around and see if we can see any others.

NARRATOR
Most people just come for the walks and the spectacular scenery.

Ben Lennon, Planning forester
This is probably the most well visited spot in the central portion of the dean. Beachenhurst Lodge which is the premier visitor site in the forest for Forest Enterprise is about quarter of a mile below us there, and during the summer we have droves of people coming up along this way visiting the sculptures. This is one of the sculpture called place that is directly behind us and is maintained as an open view point.

So we’ve probably got a third of a million to a million people somewhere in that order. Coming up and seeing this view every year.

So it’s particularly sensitive.

Anything we do in terms of felling has to be a scale that befits the landscape and the landscape form, and because it’s a big landscape it’s likely to be large scale working.

This is one way the forest can be regenerated on a small scale. Behind me you can see the fallen crowns of two or three trees there. These are mature oak trees that have been felled and are being cleared at the moment to create a hole in the forest canopy and that will encourage enough light through to get natural regeneration. A variety of species but mostly oak and beech to regenerate.

Over to my right now we see an area that has been opened up in the past, possibly ten, fifteen years ago. The regeneration has now become established and that will be growing quite well now and they will form the next crop of oak trees in the particular area. So this demonstrates that could eventually end up as two or three mature oak trees from that
hundred or hundred and fifty small sapling that you have now given a correct thinning regime.

Rob Guest
This is Britain’s premier oak forest. The forest was planted for a purpose. It was regarded as the prime location for sourcing timber for building ships.

NARRATOR
In demand not only for ships but also for construction and smelting, the oak in the Dean was en route for extinction. It didn’t help that very few acorns and seedlings escaped the attentions of the pigs and sheep.

Ben Lennon
Admiral Lord Nelson in 1803 visited the Forest of Dean in order to ascertain what resources were available in order to fuel the Naval building programme of war ships, and when he came here he was absolutely appalled at what was going on. It was estimated at that time, and he makes specific reference to that, that there were only 200 acres of good quality ships timber left standing in the dean and the dean itself is around twenty thousand acres. There’s various estimates in how many oak were used to build a war ship, but one commonly bandied around is that it is about a thousand mature oak trees.

Rob Guest
And he went away and subsequently wrote a report that was presented to the government, essentially urging something be done. And following that we saw for something like forty years, until the mid-eighteen hundreds a massive initiative to replant the woodlands of the dean.

In the twentieth century there were dramatic impacts, and this was probably most dramatic in the second World War when there was what is locally known as the great felling when nearly half of the whole forest was cleared. A huge area was cleared of trees, and most of that was replanted with conifers.

Ben Lennon
This oak tree was planted around 1812, it's this size after nearly two hundred years of growth which was one of the reasons why conifers were planted here in the first place because they will reach this size of timber in probably about sixty, seventy years,

NARRATOR
In winter hardwoods such as oak and sycamore are sold by auction. Profits go to Forest Enterprise to help it in the time honored fashion of a wilderness paying its way.

Auctioneer
As usual we've got a spread lots right across the length and breadth of Southern part of England. From the Midlands down to Exeter and from the Wye Valley across to Norfolk and Kent.

We on then to lot number eight. Sycamore at Broom Hill in Blakeney Walk.

Four thousand, four
Is that a bid I see at the doorway, four I’m offered. At four thousand pounds.

Fifteen thousand eight hundred pounds, is that sixteen? Sixteen at sixteen thousand, sixteen, sixteen two are you done then going, at sixteen two hundred left.

Chantler. Sixteen thousand two.

That lot is sold sir.

NARRATOR
A team arrive to fell the trees, and the buyer shows us why he was prepared to pay so much.

Buyer
That’s what we call a ripple sycamore, now that is the most valuable sycamore of all, is the ripple. Now that will go for very expensive furniture and the rougher of the ripple Sycamore will go for musical instruments.

Where you make your fiddles and your violins and what not where you see the face of the violin see the odd ripple up and down there. That’s where it comes from. That is the most expensive sycamore tree you’ll get is the ripple.

Question from cameraman. How do you get the ripple?

Peter Kelsall, Beat Forester
Good question, and if I knew that, we could probably make a lot of money if we were timber merchants. I mean I think it’s either a genetic factor at play or it’s possibly something to do with the either the site conditions the way the tree’s grown.

Delwyn, Tree Feller
Some of the trees are quite valuable, so when you fell them you don’t want them landing and breaking. What we are talking about is the tops.

Where it forks. You’ve got to get right up to the top of the tree and cut the one fork off or the two forks off and that saves the stem. Cos if the land on the forks they will break. So its not just a question of walking into the wood and cutting the trees off it’s a bit more specialist than that really.

Just line it up.

At least it went in the right place. It’s nice when it goes right, when it goes wrong its not so nice.

Right that gets a sweat on. Gets the adrenaline pumping.

NARRATOR
Only 250 hardwood trees will be felled this year. The wood is sold with the guarantee that it comes from a sustainably managed forest. Another hardwood tree is planted but there is a problem.
Peter Kelsall, Beat Forester
If we try to replant Sycamore in an area like this where we have so many squirrels we’d never get the Sycamore up to this sort of size and quality because of the impact of the squirrels. Sycamore is particularly susceptible to squirrel damage, they seem to like it for some reason. If you look at the beech, for example that tree there you can see all that damage at about ten, fifteen feet. That’s all been caused by the squirrel stripping the bark off.

Those points on that beech tree the wood will have been stained there will have been fungus got in there its quite likely or its quite possible that at some point in its future life the top will blow out of that beech tree, and from the point of view of producing good quality timber that beech tree is never going to produce good quality timber.

This is the wettest year ever known in the forest, with the water draining out of the plateau causing widespread flooding.

There are many things that threaten trees in their lifetime, grazing sheep pose one threat, and the exploding Fallow deer population another, particularly vulnerable are young saplings

Peter Kelsall
Typical sort of grazing damage you get with deer, and if they constantly keep browsing away on young trees like this I mean it holds the tree in check effectively because the tree never grows up.

And the whole aim of natural regeneration is to get these young naturally produced seedling eventually taking over from the mature trees round about. If the deer are constantly browsing these young trees these young trees never become established.

I mean this is about fifteen years of age. It was originally planted as a research plot to do some research studies on, and in order to get the oak established and to get it to grow the area was deer fenced as you can see.

It’s interesting if you contrast the trees and the vegetation you’ve got inside the area which is fenced to exclude deer and contrast that to the area which is open to deer and the odd sheep that gets in, and the difference in the vegetation levels you’ve got, you know it’s quite clear to see what the level, the impact of the grazing has on the level of vegetation that you get within an area.

And if the forest was completely open and sheep had particularly sheep sort of open access across the forest. The whole forest would tend to look far more like the area behind us here where the vegetation has been removed completely.

And some would argue that it’s what we want because it’s easy to walk thought, but from a ecological point of view botanical or interest point of view that is probably somewhat less interesting than areas like this which aren’t exposed to same degree of grazing.
NARRATOR
Much more dangerous is the recently arrived North American grey squirrel which very quickly drove out the native red squirrel.

Peter Kelsall
In a forest where half the area is given over to growing broad leafed trees if you’re getting this sort of damage on young trees, it normally occurs on trees roughly between aged twenty and aged fifty or so, and if you are getting this sort of damage that is killing trees, and you have got a high proportion of broad leafed trees in your forest this is a major problem.

And what we are finding now in the last five or ten years is that we are not only getting this sort of damage on broad leafed trees, but we are also getting it on conifer trees, and that’s particularly worrying because conifers are what generate the larger part of our income. In the forest in terms of timber. If you look around in crops such as some of the larch behind you can see where the tops have actually broken out as a result of the squirrels damaging the tree, the tops being killed off and then breaking out that allows fungal pathogens to get into the tree and may affect the quality of the wood through timber degrade.

It’s difficult enough to try to get broad leafed trees to regenerate successfully you get them up to fifteen or twenty years of age and then they are attacked by squirrels, and the impact of squirrels can be as great as the impact if not greater than deer. So a real problem and we have not really got a solution as to how to control the damage.

NARRATOR
Their numbers are artificially high because they beat birds to the seed left out for them by bird-lovers.

In January a rare fall of snow is an unusual event in today’s forest.

A beacon in the middle of the forest commands a view over seven counties, local residents are upset because their view is about to be spoiled by these seedlings carefully staked and protected.

Rose Camp
We have a new-comer living in the farm just below where I’m stood now, and he has through a grant from the government planted lots and lots of trees seven rows deep in places but mostly five rows. Which is in a few years’ time going to spoil the view from the top of this hill and we are stood on the top of Ruradean hill which is the highest point of the Forest of Dean.

NARRATOR
So local residents meet in their village hall to see what they can do to get the trees removed.

Andrew Gardiner County Councilor
First and foremost you are very, very welcome and thank you very much for attending.
At each stage of our negotiations everybody has been most polite and courteous to Mr and Mrs Moneykyrle and I am confident that that’s the way we will continue.

Anna Jones
You are in a very awkward situation. Somebody who owns land has every right to plant on their land whatever. And in fact what they could have done was to have planted Leyland Cyprus over the whole thing and there is absolutely nothing anybody could do about it because planting trees is not subject to any form of permission.

Ernie
I did raise it with them and they said we got the grant we can do….

Anna
Too late, too late.

Woman
We are completely at their whim

Andrew Gardiner
It is unique, it’s historic and the local population has invested so much time in that area. They have prepared the beacon. It’s regarded as significant. It can be seen from a greater distance than any other in the country.

Now I am sure if we raised the stakes irrespective of what the local Forestry Commission or anybody else say I think at the end of the day public opinion will win the day.

NARRATOR
In the spring, footpaths are closed.

In this way the authorities hope to stop Foot and Mouth Disease spreading into the forest. An outbreak has been found only a few kilometers away.

Television pictures of the slaughter will be beamed around the world.

There are two thousand sheep in the forest, and if even one is infected all will be slaughtered to contain its spread.

For one forester’s flock things look bad.

Henry Mills
This is the beginning of the end. I reckon. You know. All be what’s-his-name you can see can see down there the line there now them burning the cattle down in Arr. Where they got the Foot and Mouth down there look, there’s about a mile and a half, two mile away look. They’re down there burning the cattle, you can see the clouds of smoke going across the sky line there look.

Topsy
You’d to think it gonna be your turn next.
That’s what you’d a think. Cos it’s only a might as well say, a stone’s throw away

**NARRATOR**

Spring is lambing time, and Topsy and Henry who have kept sheep all their lives can only wonder if any of their sheep will be alive in a month’s time.

Some Foresters believe that their ancient traditions are under threat from new people moving in, and they’re looking for a way to preserve these traditions.

**Mick**

And that’s what we really need to achieve is a way forward to safeguard and secure our heritage and our history and our background and our rights.

**Man**

I mean we got to have the forest people involved every little people fighting about it instead of one lump, and we’ve got an influx of people. I’d say get on back where yous come from and leave us alone.

**Woman**

If they can’t adapt to our way of living then they shouldn’t be here.

I’m one of the people that the gentleman sitting over there would like to send back home again, but I’m sorry my daughter’s married a forester. I’ve got a grandchild and I’m a forester at heart now. What I would like to say is that I think this idea of the forester’s banding together and speaking with one voice is absolutely brilliant.

**Andrew**

In my book anybody whether he’s been here fifty years or ten years, if he’s got his heart in the right place he’ll do for me as a forester, and I think that that’s very, very important.

But we can do without people who come into the forest who want to obliterate views upon Ruradean Hill. You asked us not to mention it Mr. Chairman but it’s crucial. We can do without the people who don’t consider our heritage our culture. It’s most important.

**NARRATOR**

But there is a much more immediate problem for the people. Foot and Mouth did arrive. All the forest sheep have been rounded up and the slaughter has begun.

**Henry Mills**

Just culled the forest

**Q**

Did you have foot and mouth in yourself?

**Henry**

Well they said I had it. They called it exclusive, which they wasn’t sure whether it was foot and mouth or whether it wasn’t. They could never find out what it was.
Na that's the butchers there.

That's another photograph of them up the road all penned in, ready to be killed. They make tears to come in your eyes when you see all your sheep a going.

**Topsy**

We be just getting over it now. But it do still hurt

**Henry**

The forest is dead. There’s nothing in the forest today. You can go up through there now you can go up there now and all up the road there’s all wreaths crosses, photographs of sheep you know like put on cardboard you know all up there.

**NARRATOR**

The irony is that with the paths closed and the removal of all the sheep the Royal Forest is having a brief respite.

The absence of tourists and grazing sheep allow for a lush spring growth this year.

The forest and its occupants have weathered many crises and only time will tell whether the ever increasing number of tourists and alien invaders like the grey squirrel will change this pocket wilderness for good.