

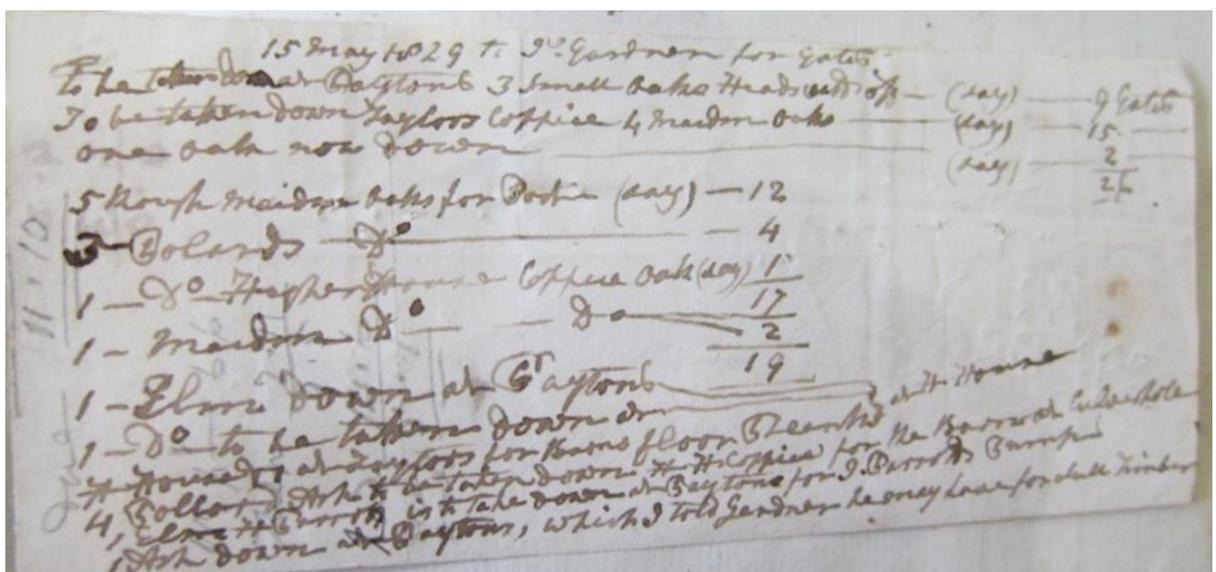
## *Branscombe Project History Snips*

### *John Torrance: Branscombe Woods & Trees*

February 21<sup>st</sup> will be a First Anniversary for Barbara Farquharson and myself. This time last year the law was changed to make Civil Partnerships available to persons of opposite sex. We had both had long marriages in the past and wanted something different for our later years, so we became Civil Partners.

Coronavirus was only a Chinese whisper in the wind – little did we know what was coming! Among the things it swept away was a winter talk I was going to give on the history of **Branscombe's woods and trees**. So here's a snip from it.

John Ford lived at Gay's Farm. By 1830 he was supplying customers with lime, cider and other goods. He was also on the way to becoming the village's chief landowner by buying the leases or copyholds of small farms. In the contracts drawn up with his tenants, he always reserved the trees for himself, and so he became a timber merchant. He kept meticulous accounts in a big leather-bound book now in the Devon Heritage Centre, between whose pages I found this slip of paper:



It's a rough note to James Gardiner, the farmer at Culverwell, or Culverhole as it was called then. Culverwell contained about two dozen gated enclosures, and a number of the gates, as well as some barns, needed to be renewed. John Ford explains what trees, on which three of his farms, Gardner's men can take:

15 May 1829 to James Gardiner for Gates

To be taken down at Paytons 3 small Oaks Heads cut off	---	(say)	— 9 gates
To be taken down Taylors Coppice 4 Maiden Oaks	-----	(say)	—15 ---
One Oak now down	-----	(say)	— <u>2</u> ---
			26
5 Rough Maiden Oaks for posts	(say)-----		12
3 Pollards ditto	-----		4
1 — ditto Higher House Coppice Oak	(say)-----		1
1 — Maiden ditto	----- ditto		<u>2</u>
			19

1 Elm down at Paytons or at H. House  
 1 — ditto — to be taken down {?} at Higher House  
 1[Elm?] Housed at Taylors for Barns floor Planks  
 4 Pollard Ash to be taken down H.H. Coppice for the Barns at Culverhole  
 1 Elm H Parrot is to take down at Paytons for J Parrots barn [?]  
 1 Ash down at Paytons, which I told Gardiner he may have for dull [?] timber

Paytons, Taylors and Higher House were three small farms on the north side of the road between Cotte (above Street) and Cox’s Corner.



Old pollarded ash at Culverwell

Taylors and Higher House possessed coppices on the north-facing hillside beyond Northern Lane. They’re now secondary woodland, but were still managed as coppices in 1829. That is to say, ‘standards’ – tall timber trees (such as self-sown ‘maiden’ oaks) – were interspersed with lower trees, ‘coppiced’ or ‘pollarded’ every few years for straight poles used as tool handles, fence rails, etc. These were normally ash, as here, or hazel. ‘Coppicing’ meant cutting to the ground; ‘pollards’ were cut higher up. Ralph Cox tells me that his uncle coppiced hollies for poles used as runners when winching fishing-boats up and down the beach.



Old coppiced ash at Higher House

From the coppices, John Ford offers 5 oaks from Taylors and one from Higher House, for gates. From Higher House (less well managed?)

he seems to be offering 5 'rough' maiden oaks, 3 coppiced oaks and a pollard oak, for gateposts.

At Paytons, which had no coppice, there were nevertheless three small oaks with trunks straight enough for timber. These may have been growing in hedgerows around the farm. The same is likely for the elms, one to be felled at Higher House, with two already down (one stored at Taylors for barn floor planks) and another to be taken down at Paytons for 'J. Parrot's barn', together with an ash tree of second quality. Elms were ideal for barn floors, doors, etc, and the coppiced ash for barn rafters.

So John Ford's little slip of paper has opened a window into the farming world before the age of imported deal, corrugated iron or plastic. Woodworking and blacksmithing were still basic to all other work. In 1830 – but not for much longer – Branscombe was self-sufficient in the many kinds of wood it needed, from building timbers to cartwheels to basketry.