

## VILLAGE ECHOES

### THE MAKING OF THE WEALD

Walking in our lane at the end of August it was hard to avoid the crunch of acorns. Although this seemed early it isn't surprising after the strange weather we've had this year. It brought to mind the old system of pannage, as this harvest was known, a vital part of the year for Goudhurst and the whole of the Weald of Kent. Pannage is the right or custom of allowing domestic pigs to forage freely in wooded areas.

The name Weald originally comes from the old name of *Andredswæld*, meaning *a dense forest where nobody dwells*, because it was thought for many years that there was little or no habitation in this inhospitable environment. It is now known that small settlements were established in clearings. This was early on when hunter gatherers made their home in the shelter of the forest, which provided food to hunt.

Goudhurst is in the High Weald, which has a unique, radiating network of ancient routeways and tracks. These routes were first formed when early settlers from the surrounding lands began to exploit the area's woods for timber and fuel together with a seasonal source of food for their animals such as acorns, although acorns are poisonous to other livestock, such as cattle and ponies, due to their high tannin content. Domesticated pigs, being descended from wild boar, enjoyed acorns as a natural food from as far back as the Neolithic period or even earlier.

Pannage became an integral part of life in the ancient Weald, with evidence of the practice dating back to the Iron Age and continuing through to the medieval period. Many villages in the Weald with the suffix "-den" (meaning a woodland clearing) were established before the Norman conquest.



These medieval farmers are knocking acorns off the tree for the pigs below

During the Anglo-Saxon period the Jutes were the main invaders who settled in Kent. They established a system of administration and government by initially dividing the land into wide bands called *lathes*, which spanned Kent from north to south. These divisions largely followed the natural geography in the landscape, such as rivers or hills, already established as routes by the Romans. These routes became the foundation for many of the roads still in use today. Each band contained its own township or *vill* in the north from which it took its name. Goudhurst was in the lathe of Milton Regis between two manors of Marden and Little Barnfield.



The five main lathes of Kent in the 13<sup>th</sup> century

Farmers drove their herds from settled areas on the north Downs to the same woodland place year after year each autumn. The trackways were created by this seasonal movement, or 'droves' of animals from the north and south to the "dens". Pannage, also known as 'mast' included acorns, chestnuts, beechnuts and other nuts and seeds that fell to the forest floor. It provided essential food for the pigs in areas where other grazing was limited and contributed to the local economy and way of life in the Weald. The foraging had the added advantage of clearing the land. Domesday records indicate that around 150,000 pigs would have been driven to and from the woods of the High and Low Weald

Pannage continued until the Norman Conquest, when land division and allocation by William the Conqueror altered these long-standing practices.