

A cricket-bat willow plantation

Winterbotham’s plantation

Cricket bats are made from a specific type of willow tree: English willow – *Salix alba caerulea*. This species has proved to be most suitable because of its light weight, toughness and resilience.

The plantation at Stonehouse was created for Arthur Winterbotham, a wealthy businessman and Lord of the Manor from 1906. The willows were grown on a strip of land near the manor house, bordering the southern arm of the River Frome.

Winterbotham loved cricket, having played for Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire Colts, Rugby School and Marylebone Cricket Club. He probably regarded the willow business as an interesting sideline. We think it operated in the 1920s and 1930s.



Willows being cut in readiness for cricket bat production (courtesy D&M Ball). The two figures at the right are believed to be Arthur & Caroline Winterbotham.



The willow plantation during the 1920s or 30s, showing rows of young sets. Several of the irrigation channels are clearly visible.

Growing willow needs a lot of regular watering. A network of small channels was created on the land for this purpose. Water flow through this system was controlled by small sluices – simple stop boards held in place by U-shaped iron supports.

Arthur Winterbotham died in 1936 and, until recently, we believed this signalled the end of the willow business. His widow Caroline continued to live in the manor house until her death in 1974.

The plantation in recent times

We examined the plantation in spring 2014 before the weeds and undergrowth became rampant. The water channels and their sluices were in a derelict condition. Yet the willow trees appeared to have thrived without them. Perhaps Winterbotham had been trying to enhance the growth of the willows?



Part of the plantation in 2015. One of the irrigation channels is clearly visible.



Probable inlet for water from the River Frome at the eastern end of the plantation. Pair of iron channel pieces still in place which would have carried a stop board some 2 feet wide. Some form of pump was probably necessary to lift the water from the Frome at this location.

Imagine our surprise when a number of willows was harvested in late 2014! A dozen or so large trees were felled and taken away to be made into cricket bats. And more than 20 young trees had been planted to replace those felled.

Examination of the annual rings on the felled trees revealed that they had been planted some 20 years before harvesting. So it appears that the trees may have been harvested one or more times since the plantation was operated for Winterbotham back in the 1930s. We have yet to find out!