

## Mature Note

Staverton Thicks is a relict fragment of ancient forest near Boyton. It's like a child's idea of a haunted wood, straight out of one of Grimm's fairy stories as illustrated by Arthur Rackham, full of mysteries and surprises. There are huge gnarled oaks there and some of the tallest hollies in Britain, all tangled together in a wonderful profusion of trunks and branches. It's quite dark in places, but there are also sunny glades where some forest giant has crashed to the ground and torn a rent in the dense canopy. Trees lie where they fall, decaying undisturbed, and you have to pick your way over and round them. It's easy to lose one's sense of direction, but there is also a sense of glorious seclusion and tranquillity, even though you are never more than half a mile from the surrounding tracks. It's all totally unmanaged, untidied and unspoiled – so of course a haven for wildlife of all kinds.

Insects abound in the rotting timber, and in turn attract woodpeckers, tits and tree creepers. Redstarts and flycatchers breed here, so do tawny owls, and on one memorable spring day I even heard the



Contributed

*Hawfinch*

fugitive, bell-like song of a golden oriole from somewhere in the upper branches. I've also found hawfinch here and it's worth looking for them now, since there has been an invasion of these large finches from central Europe into southern England this year. Hawfinches are built rather like little parrots, bull-headed and with massive bills capable of cracking open the hardest kernels of stone-fruits. They are quite colourful too, but very shy and most likely to be seen flying up from the forest floor, calling with a volley of explosive *tick* calls.

The history of the Thicks is something of a mystery, but I like to believe the story that the land was once farmed by the monks of Boyton Priory, who at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538 were told that they could take just one last crop from the land. So they planted acorns. That's forward thinking for you.

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