Blacknest Fields' historic timeline (site lay *within* the Alice Holt royal forest until 1815):

Alice Holt Forest in pre-Roman times Patches of old-growth forests were still in existence at the start of the Roman period. In general, such forests persist longest where soils are poor. This was the case for the Forest of Woolmer and Alice Holt as Alice Holt was on gault clay, and Woolmer on sand.

Alice Holt Forest in Roman times: Hampshire was under Roman rule from in AD 43 until the withdrawal of imperial authority in AD 410. Alice Holt's clay made the area important for pottery production, with kilns concentrated around Goose Green, as documented by Malcolm Lyne. Much old-growth forest around Alice Holt and Blacknest was felled to fire the pottery kilns.

Alice Holt Forest in Anglo Saxon period: After the Romans left, pottery production slumped although small scale pottery production seems to have persisted at small scale into the 5th century. As Anglo-Saxons invaded England, populations in Roman towns such as Winchester and Silchester declined. C5th and C6th settlements are poorly documented but documents do show the forests:
The name 'Alice Holt' is believed to derive from Ælfsige, the Bishop of Winchester, who had bishopric rights over the forest in AD 984 and so was responsible for the land on behalf of the king. The element 'holt' is Old English for 'wood', so *Ælfsiges Holt* is 'Ælfsige's Wood'.
The name 'Woolmer Forest' is found in Anglo-Saxon charters that document land agreements in King Alfred's reign (around AD 890). The name 'Wuffmaires gemaire' points to the wolves that were once numerous in the area around Bordon and Alice Holt.
Various old Anglo-Saxon names persist in later maps (including Binsted's 1830 Tithe map). Aldix in Isingston may derive from Old Wyck (= old farm); Strounden = marshy. Hatch is a gateway to the forest and maps often reveal funnel shaped fields associated with farms at the edge of the forest, which would have assisted the round-up of livestock grazed on the forest. The name Gimesham comes from Hamme (Saxon for meadow) and Gimes (thought to be a prehistoric monument).

Alice Holt Forest in Norman times: After William the Conqueror became King (1066-1087) large swathes of the country were designated as royal hunting forests. These forests were not necessarily densely wooded areas and often contained large sections of wood-pastureland, with shifting mosaics of deer grazing 'lawns', open-grown trees, open heath, thorny scrub, and wetland bogs. The New Forest, one of the earliest royal forests to be established (in 1079), comprised about 50% open areas. Similarly, the huge Woolmer and Alice Holt royal forest, which extended from Alice Holt in the north to Bere Forest in the south, was a wood-pasture landscape with many open sections amongst its oaks. Old maps suggest that royal hunting parties would probably have ridden from the Great Lodge at Alice Holt, across meadowland clearings in Blacknest, to nearby copses such as Cobden's Copse.
The Forests of Woolmer and Alice Holt were jointly administered in Medieval times and indeed were separated only by a narrow margin of enclosures: Kingsley means, literally, the King's clearing and refers to the clear land between the two royal forests.
William and his successors (Rufus the Red 1087-1100, Henry I 1068-1135, Stephen 1096-1154 and Henry II) increased the area of forest land until a third of England was so classified.
Both Edward I (1239-1307) and Edward II (1307-1327) frequently visited the Woolmer and Alice Holt Forest. Edward I built a Lodge in Lynchborough in 1285 where he and his Queen could stay. It is also documented that when King Edward II was stag hunting in Woolmer, a kitchen worker called Morris Ken who was riding in front of him fell off several times. The King apparently laughed so much that he ordered 20 shillings to be given to Morris Ken, then an enormous sum.
The royal hunting forests were governed by harsh Norman Forest law, which protected the "beasts of the chase" (deer & wild pig) for the pleasure of the monarch. Red deer were kept in Woolmer Forest and fallow deer in Alice Holt Forest. The Norman laws forbade not only the hunting of game in the forest, but also poaching of any kind, the cutting of wood and the collection of fallen timber, berries and anything growing within the forest. Local farmers were also banned from assarting (enclosing the land by fencing) as this restricted the hunt. Punishments were often much more severe than common law punishments, ranging from fines to - in the most severe cases - death. The height of

enforcement of forest law was in the 12th and 13th centuries. To assist law enforcement, the forest boundaries were periodically charted through “perambulations”:

- The 1190 Perambulation documents the Woolmer and Alice Holt Forest boundary as including the whole of Alton, Selborne and Petersfield.
- A further Perambulation was undertaken in 1270s.
- Little documentation is available for the later medieval period. Social unrest, major economic trouble and declining populations were caused by the 100 Years’ War (1337-1444) and by the Black Death, which reached its peak in Hampshire in the winter of 1348-49 and shook the agrarian economy. But the name of Alice Holt forest is recorded: *Alfsiholt* in 1169; *Alfieseholt* in 1242; *Halfyesholt* in 1301; *Aishol* in 1362/63; and the name *Alice Holt* finally appearing in 1373.

The Tudors and Elizabethans considered the forest an immensely valuable resource**:** royal hunting remained important and Alice Holt’s clay soils produced magnificent stands of oak, ideal for ship building. The young Henry VIII (1509-1547) was given the post of Ranger of Woolmer Forest - as second son, he was not expected to become king. He spent much time in Woolmer, staying at Lode Farm in Kingsley.
A detailed forest survey was undertaken in 1635. The forest boundary had remained largely the same as recorded in medieval perambulations, but there were comments about how much forest had been enclosed (assarted) as farmland. Enforcement of Forest Law was by now laxer, and of course the crown derived income from assarting.

Gilbert White (1720-1793) knew the forests well, not least because he frequently visited Marelands (Bentley). Marelands had originally provided stabling for the Great Lodge at Alice Holt and in White’s time was still connected to it by an avenue for carriages. White described the forest as being by this time reduced to about 7 miles in length and two and a half in breadth, bordered by Kingsley, Headley, Bramshott, Liss and Greatham parishes. He describes an ice storm, which created a great deal of fallen timber in the forest, over which locals from Frensham and Binsted asserted their commoners’ rights to taken fallen trees, to the dismay of Lord Stawell, the Warden who leased the forest and disputed their timber rights. White also writes of the decimation during 1720s of Woolmer Forest’s great herd of some 500 red deer by the Waltham Blacks, a band of anarchist poachers who roamed Hampshire’s woodlands. White goes on to recount that George I sent a huntsman and six yeomen in scarlet jackets laced with gold, attended by stag hounds, who were ordered to ‘take every deer in this forest alive and to convey them in carts to Windsor.’
From 1770s onwards Alice Holt and Woolmer forests were devoted primarily to producing oak for the Royal Navy. Alice Holt was the most important for this. In 1784 alone, some 1,000 oaks were felled for warships for the Napoleonic Wars. By the end of the 18th century, few large trees remained. In 1811, the Lieutenant of the Forest was dismissed because the forest had been so badly neglected. In 1815, the Office of Woods initiated a massive re-planting programme on 1,600 acres of Alice Holt, all oaks. This established the current boundary of Alice Holt forest. For the first time, Blacknest Fields now lay outside the royal Alice Holt forest boundary, but was still part of the local common ground.

Victorian era (1837-1901) In 1857, the Binsted Inclosure Award re-allocated Binsted parish’s common lands. Inclosure Acts for small areas had been passed sporadically since the 12th century, but the 1845 General Inclosure Act created the Inclosure Commission, which could enclose land without submitting a request to Parliament. After 1845, enclosure swept the country. Binsted’s Map was drawn up in 1852, its accompanying Award document in 1857. [1]

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[1] Note: Woolmer Forest was also enclosed and ceased to be a forest in 1860s, its new use being an Army training area, with troop camps built at Bordon and Longmoor.

The Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor (precursors to parish councils) were given land for community recreation activities and to assist the poor. This included Blacknest Fields and other parcels of 'waste' land that lay outside the recently-planted Alice Holt forest boundary.

Inclosure meant literally enclosing a field with a fence or a hedge to prevent others using it. Hawthorn hedges were planted around the sites.

Prior to inclosure, rights to use the land were shared between landowners and commoners. Traditionally, a manor's landholding would typically consist of:

- Two or three very large areas of arable land
- Several large common hay meadows (on which commoners typically had rights to graze their animals when hay was not being grown),
- *Closes* (small areas of enclosed private land, such as paddocks, orchards or gardens)
- In some cases, a park around the principal manor house
- 'Common' land, controlled by the lord of the manor, over which commoners had agreed rights, such as pasture, pannage or estovers (such as taking wood for fuel); and
- 'Waste' land (meaning *uninhabited places*) such as downland, moors, and land in awkward locations (e.g., inconvenient manorial borders), was typically used by landless peasants.

Inclosure created a legally binding ownership system. Before inclosure, lords of the manors already held the bulk of the land, but they did not legally own in today's sense: they had to respect the commoners' various rights, and their large landholdings were scattered. Inclosure's overall effect was to dispossess many, enrich a few, and assist England's agricultural and industrial revolutions. Inclosure enabled farms to be consolidated, and made land much more valuable – typically, inclosed land doubled in value. Freed from their traditional focus of feeding the local population, big landowners harnessed agricultural advances, specialised, and sold produce to the cities. Inclosure had dire effects on the prosperity of smallholders and landless labourers, and large numbers of poor people left rural areas to become labourers in urban areas. The population of Blacknest seems to have reduced significantly following Inclosure. Extinguishing commoners' rights, and removing the pasture commons and *wastes,* meant ordinary folk lost rights to graze animals, gather fuel, and go gleaning/berrying. Even tenants who received land plots found their compensation insufficient to offset the costs of inclosure fencing, and the loss of previously enjoyed rights. An anonymous protest poem summed up the widespread feeling that Inclosure was a gigantic swindle by large landowners:

> *'They hang the man and flog the woman, Who steals the goose from off the common,*
> *Yet let the greater villain loose, That steals the common from the goose.*
> *The law demands that we atone, When we take things we do not own,*
> *But leaves the lords and ladies fine, Who take things that are yours and mine.'*

Inclosure also created many new public roads (including the Frith End to Bentley road) and redefined rights to bridleways, footpaths, and water courses. Roads through enclosed common land were made as straight as possible, and to standard widths. Initially, roads were wide (> 18m), to allow easy movement of flocks and herds, but had narrowed by 1852.

In Victorian times, Blacknest was more densely populated than today, and was sufficiently important for BPC to have a 'Blacknest Committee' (although records of its work seem to have been lost).

Blacknest Fields' two parcels of land (Blacknest Recreation Ground and Allotment Fields) were very much at the heart of village life. From 1872 until 1913, Blacknest had two pubs: the 'Jolly Farmer' was at the crossroads (Fig 1) and 'The Cricketers' was right opposite the Recreation Ground. The Recreation Ground's footpath continued right to The Cricketers' front door. Blacknest's most infamous murder took place at the Cricketers, where the landlord shot his wife (a crime for which he was later hanged). In 1913, renewal of the Cricketers' licence was refused. The grounds given were that one pub seemed sufficient for a village of Blacknest's size, but there may have been a social issue, as The Cricketers seems to have been used mainly by seasonal hop pickers.

Figure 1: 'Jolly Farmer' pub at Blacknest crossroads, with Church of St Alban the Martyr behind.

After Binsted School opened in 1874, most of Blacknest's children were enrolled there, rather than at Bentley School. An 1882 Binsted School Logbook entry noted that 60 of the children came from *"points along the road from Binsted to Blacknest"* (on which there were four public houses within 2 miles.) The Blacknest children do not seem to have distinguished themselves. There were many complaints about their poor attendance and lateness, in part because they had to walk two miles to school, so rain and snow took their toll. Poverty was clearly a factor, too: the parents struggled to pay their 'school pence'; and the children were *"often in the Alice Holt wood", "victualling pigs", "minding cows*" or taken out of school to help with seasonal farming tasks, in particular tying in the hops in Spring. The children's bad language on their way home, and high incidences of childhood illnesses in Blacknest also caused the schoolmaster concern.

Many Blacknesters were 'Dissenters': Blacknest's Bible Christian Chapel (on Binsted Road) was popular with non-conformists. An Anglican alternative was built - the 'iron church' of Church of St Alban the Martyr opened in 1899 near Blacknest Fields (its spire visible in the photograph of the Jolly Farmer in Fig 1). This could apparently seat 150 worshippers.

Victorian police were zealous. Plain-clothed police apprehended and prosecuted a group of Blacknest men for playing 'pitch and toss' (a gambling offence.) 'Stop and search' was used to prosecute a Blacknest man after his discharge from the Alton workhouse, for the supposed theft of two swedes (and later, for being in possession of 'mangold wurzels'.)

Early 20th Century: There was a well at the Jolly Farmer crossroads. The Wey Valley Water company installed a clay pipe across Blacknest Fields to carry rainwater from the springs of Alice Holt forest to the Jolly Farmer crossroads. The light railway spur that had been built between Bentley station and Bordon Camp stopped in Blacknest (at the point now occupied by Blacknest Industrial Estate).

World War II From 1939, and throughout the war, the Ministry of Supply sourced pit props for the mines from the local forests. They were mainly loaded to rail at Bordon Station. George Clements (author of the booklet 'My Binsted') states that, in 1940, "*the Ministry of Supply took over Blacknest Recreation Ground and made a road right across it, to make a way into Alice Holt Forest. The men cut thousands of oak and other trees. Most of the men were New Zealand soldiers, who used double bladed axes. The local men used single bladed* axes*. The timber was carted to the sawmill at Whitehill, where the trees were cut into all sorts of sizes. A lot of the timber was made into railway sleepers for Iraq or Iran."* Clements continues: *"There used to be three big steel tubes standing on the cricket pitch at Blacknest. Men and forestry girls brought cordwood, which was cut up and burnt in the tubes to make charcoal. The charcoal was put on rail at Bentley Station and sent to be made into explosives and flares. Mr A. Skilton did the burning, with others. Once made, the charcoal was never allowed to get damp or wet. It took a lot of charcoal to make a hundredweight – I know this is right as I helped to put it on the rail while we worked for the Ministry. It was carried in box trucks and covered with tarpaulins to keep it dry."*

Post War In 1950, planning permission was acquired to build a Village Hall adjacent to the Recreation Ground (although this was never built). The Anglican church and railway also later closed. The Blacknest Industrial Estate was built on the old railway site.

NOTE: Further information about the history of Alice Holt forest is published in Roy Waight's book, https://farnhammuseumsociety.org.uk/Alice_Holt.htm