

7km Ecclesall Woods walk

Incorporating examples of over 1000 historical features.

Please don't take any statements here as definitive just the best I could do at the time, if you know more please let me know. Borrowings from various books and on-line sources mostly listed later...

You may come across references to Woods number 1, 2 and 3. Wood 1 is northernmost bordered by Abbey Lane, Dobcroft Rd and Whirlowdale Rd. The other side of Whirlowdale Rd is Wood 2 with Abbey Lane to its West and running down to Abbeydale Rd. Wood 3 is West of Abbey Lane and features the bird sanctuary and Woodland Discovery Centre.

The points of interest are in order of visit to the named points on the route map below.

- Q-Pit

This is one of the more distinct of about 60 Q-Pits in these woods. They are characterised by a raised circular earth & rubble bank with a break and possibly a banked ditch on the downslope side. Q-Pits were used for the production of "white coal". This was wood that had been heated to the point that all the moisture was driven out but not allowed to char like charcoal. White coal burns intensely but at a lower temperature than charcoal and was used for small scale lead smelting, the lower temperature reduces vaporisation of the lead. Larger lead smelting operations were in "Boles", there are several place names in the Peak District incorporating "Bole" indicating they were the location of lead smelters.

Lead was not mined in the woods but either the ore (galena) was brought here or the white coal delivered to the locations where it was to be used. Dredgings from the mill-pond at the Industrial Hamlet were found to have high concentrations of heavy metals, presumably from Limb Brook (perhaps from its tributary, Ryecroft Brook which passed the site of Ryecroft lead smelting mill).

Nobody seems quite sure exactly how the Q-Pits functioned, a possible explanation is that a fire was lit under a pile of wood with the pile somehow protected from the fire. As with Charcoal burning, the whitecoal may have been covered in earth and turf to retain the heat but with a way out for the moist hot air. The tail of the pit was an air inlet, also covered over to prevent accidentally setting fire to the drying wood. Perhaps also there would have been a "chimney" through the drying wood.

Those not familiar with Q-pits may describe them as "bomb craters" and actually there is one WW2 bomb crater in the woods – but only one!

- Wood Collier's Grave

Inscription: *"In Memory of GEORGE YARDLEY Woodcollier he was Burnt To death in his Cabbin on This place Oct 11th 1786 William Brooks Salesman David Glossop Gamekeeper Tho. Smith Besomemaker Samp. Brookshaw Innkeeper."* The suggestion is that George had a little too much to drink and was insensible when his hut caught fire. The publican and his drinking companions perhaps felt some responsibility and so paid for the memorial.

- Charcoal hearth

Close to the Collier's Grave. There are over 300 hearths in the woods but are hard to identify as they are just flat areas of earth rather than pits. The soil within a round or oval 6-10m feature may unearth some charcoal which indicates a charcoal hearth. You may have read a description of charcoal burning in "Swallows & Amazons" by Arthur Ransome.

- Collier's Pond

Constructed in 2009 in a small former ganister quarry where water pooled in winter but was a dried up muddy mess much of the year. The aim is to encourage flora and fauna. Named by children of Dobcroft Primary. Another pond was constructed in Donkey Field intended to provide a habitat for amphibians but this suffers from an invasive plant species (cressula) and is in a poor condition.

- Bird Sanctuary

17 hectares are reserved for the sanctuary. Over 60 bird species have been observed. Parts of the hill fort and associated field system are within the sanctuary as are more former ganister & coal workings. I'm told

there's a Heronry there and on one occasion, walking near the hill fort, a group of about a dozen Heron flew over us.

- Romano-British Hill Fort

A series of banks and ditches SE of the scarp slope ("cliff") above Limb Brook. Access is not permitted as it lies within the bird sanctuary. An archaeological survey found no more than the earthworks which have been degraded by subsequent events and land-uses: coppicing, Q-pits, quarrying.

- Ganister Quarry (not on the walk route)

Ganister is a high silica content clay, widely used as fireclay by the several Dysons works around Sheffield to make such as furnace lining bricks. It's commonly found below coal measures being the earth in which the plants that became coal grew on, traces of the roots can sometimes be found in the ganister. The quarry on the down slope beyond the Romano British camp and beside the bird sanctuary seems to be one of the larger examples and yielded coal and ganister, small examples of both may be found in the area.

- Ryecroft Mill

Previously known as Dore Corn Mill or Jacky Mill also Lim or Limes lead smelting mill. Some nearby fields were known as upper and lower belland (Belland land is that polluted by lead).

There are visible remains of the Wheel-pit, it was variously a corn mill and the site of lead smelting.

- Limb Lane picnic area & CP

This area was formerly quarried and has been infilled and landscaped. Quarrying was for ganister and coal. A large diameter pipe spews water and an orange deposit, the start of Ryecroft brook.

- A common indicator of coal mining is the orange deposits of (insoluble) Ferric Hydroxide in streamways. The coal contains Iron Pyrites (Ferrous Sulphate), exposure to water, air and bacteria causes a chemical change (oxidation). The Pyrites makes the coal less desirable as it is prone to spit glowing embers (the Ringinglow seam was known as poor house-coal for this reason). Ferrous Sulphate was known as Copperas and used in the tanning industry. The Ringinglow coal was exploited for Copperas production and this is the origin of the name of Copperas House (ruin) at Ringinglow (about a mile NW of the woods).

- Moss Valley Ganister mine

The patch of land north of the car-park and east of Limb Lane is called "The Moss". Mining was for ganister and coal. I cannot establish whether this was open-cast or underground mining but one old map does show "shaft".

- Ryecroft Bridge

Grade II listed building. The channel under the bridge is stone lined to prevent the water undercutting the sides of the bridge. *Footbridge spanning an unnamed tributary of the Limb Brook. Mid C18. Coursed squared stone. Single round arch with straight parapet walls and rubble coping. At the south-east end, 2 ashlar gate piers.*

- Boundary between Mercia and Northumbria

The Limb Brook formed the boundary and later between Yorkshire (East Riding) and Derbyshire. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says: "And Ecgbert led an army to Dore against the Northumbrians and they offered him obedience and concord and thereupon they separated" and thus King Ecgbert became "Our Lord of the whole English speaking race, from the Channel to the Firth of Forth". This was Egbert of Wessex who had already conquered Mercia and seems to have been raiding Northumbria. As King Eanred of Northumbria was also under attack from Viking raiders it seems he accepted defeat (at nearby Dore where there is a monument to mark the event) without a battle in approx. AD827. The name Dore is from *dor* the same Old English root as door, meaning a pass between two kingdoms. The origin of the name Limb Brook may be derived from the presence of Lime (Linden) trees at some past time and the Old English/Old Norse *lind*.

- Dore mine (?)

A small tributary to the Limb rises within a small fenced off area and crosses the path heavily laden with orange ferric hydroxide. This may have been Dore Mine, worked until 1940 by two miners who were transferred to more productive mines as part of the war effort.

- SMME
Sheffield & District Society of Model & Experimental Engineers. Abbeydale Miniature Railway.
- Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet scythe and steelworks (not on the route but worth a visit, especially on the occasion of special events).
Manager's House and Worker's Cottage, waterwheels, workshops, tilt hammers, a grinding hull, steam engine and the last complete surviving crucible steel furnace in the UK. It is easy to imagine that Ecclesall Woods provided coal, ganister for the crucibles, firewood, scythe handles, besoms, baskets, the heavy timbers for machinery and buildings.
- Holloway.
There is a very dense network of paths in the woods including well surfaced bridleways, what look like "paved" pack-horse paths, many smaller but signposted paths and even more that are not signposted. Only the more prominent are shown on the OS maps. In addition the archaeologists point out some now unused but still evident hollow-ways.
- Cup & Ring stone
Most cup and ring marked stones in UK are further north (predominantly Northumberland and Scotland). Nobody knows their significance or origin. They are believed to date back 4-5000 years. In the 1970s a solicitor (Ronald Morris) made a study of cup and ring stones and listed 104 possible explanations for them including suggestions like "messages from outer-space" (he rated all suggestions out of 10 and scored that one zero). In the face of that news one of our group promptly proposed explanation 105 – that there is no stone but all visitors to the woodland glade suffer the same mass-hallucination. The Ecclesall Wood stone is a relatively recent find (early 1980s). Its location is not publicised for fear of theft or damage. The location of a second stone found in 2001 is a more closely guarded secret, I believe it's somewhere in the bird sanctuary. There are rumours of a third... The first stone is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. *The well preserved cup and ring carved rock 740m east of Park Head House is the first prehistoric carving to be discovered in the eastern foothills of the South Pennines. It is therefore a very rare, in situ, example of prehistoric rock art in this area. The carving itself is also unusual, with the raised oval boss being unique in its composition.*
The second stone is not scheduled, perhaps because scheduling requires that the precise location is made public.
- Saw pit – I've not identified one
There are supposed to be a number of saw pits in the woods, these would be rectangular stone-lined trenches. A two-man hand saw would be operated by one man in the pit and one above to split large timbers into planks. Such saws are still manufactured in Sheffield by [Thomas Flinn & Co Ltd](#) I'm told they sell well to such as US National Parks where power tools are prohibited.

Land use:

The area demonstrates sufficient variety of mature tree species to be designated as "ancient woodland" – i.e. it has been woodland for over 400 years. In the past it has been

- A deer park, set up in 1319 by Sir Ralph de Ecclesall
- "Coppice with standards" 1600-1800. Coppiced trees produced slender timber needed for besoms, hurdles, baskets. Standards were trees allowed to grow for longer for making larger items – farm carts, buildings. Some of the wood was used for charcoal or whitecoal.
- 1750-1940 some mining and quarrying for ganister and coal
- 1800-1820 demand for coppiced wood declined, and there was extensive planting of trees for timber (sweet chestnut, beech, larch, Scots pine, ash and elm).
- 1900-1927 falling demand for timber due to cheaper imports led to reduced commercial value and activity
- 1927 JG Greaves helped the City purchase the woods as a civic amenity.
- Current: Many trees are reaching maturity and the woodland is under active management which involves numerous approaches

- Remove mature trees and replant with native species.
- Clear fallen timber blocking footpaths.
- Render damaged trees safe by removing branches. Many trunks are left standing and fallen timber left to rot on the ground. This is to aid biodiversity, in particular lichens, mosses, fungi and insects which in turn provide food and habitats for birds and small mammals.
- Monitor and control invasive species – Spanish bluebell, Himalayan balsam, rhododendron, holly.
- Monitor disease – all but 2 mature elms succumbed to Dutch Elm disease. Young elms are resistant but become susceptible as they age. The ash trees are now being monitored for signs of die-back.

The land retains water and can get very soft underfoot but this is ameliorated by the network of drainage channels, presumably dating back to the times of coppicing and charcoal production.

Books

Not necessarily specific to Ecclesall Woods

- **“Ecclesall Woods, Sheffield: a Flora”** itemises 532 species.
- **“Common Species in Sheffield's Woods”** has chapters on Butterflies, Fungi, Moths, Birds, Mosses/Liverworts, Mammals, Reptiles, Amphibians, Beetles, Hoverflies, Shieldbugs, Wood Ants and Dragonflies.
- **Making Charcoal and Biochar: A comprehensive guide** By Rebecca Oaks
- **The Woodland Heritage Manual** By Ian D. Rotherham, Melvyn Jones, Lindy Smith, Christine Handley (eds) – this has specific references to Q-pits. *Ian Rotherham is a professor at SHU*
- **British Prehistoric Rock Art** By Stan Beckinstall – many maps, diagrams and photos of cup and ring stones
- **The Prehistoric Rock Art of Galloway and the Isle of Man** By Ronald Morris
- **The forgotten mines of Sheffield** by Ray Battye – unfortunately forgot to mention Ecclesall Woods mines but interesting coverage of coal & ganister

Links:

Historic UK Maps <https://maps.nls.uk/>

Government administrative maps magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx Example: zoom to an area then go Countryside Stewardship> Historic Environment> Scheduled Monuments

Detail of monuments and scheduled buildings can be found here: www.historicengland.org.uk

www.friendsofecclesallwoods.org.uk

sheffieldwoodlandconnections.co.uk Trees, plants, fungi

www.youtube.com/watch?v=egXRCZY9_1A Charcoal burner at work

[Cup and Ring stones](#) A lengthy document about the subject

Domesday book online opendomesday.org see Hallam and Dore

