ECONOMIC AND SOCIA L HISTORY

From the late middle ages until the second part of the nineteenth century Sheffield’s ancient woods were managed as coppices, or, to be more precise as coppices-with-stands. In this kind of woodland management, most of the trees were periodically (every 15-30 years) cut down to the ground to what is called a called a stool and from the stool grew multiple stems, called coppice or underwood. Some trees were not coppiced but allowed to grow on to become mature single-stemmed trees and these were the standards. The standards were of various ages. The coppice provided wood for the standards provided timber. The timber trees, mainly oak, were for building projects. Some outstanding examples of timber-framed buildings are open to the public. For example, the gatehouse of the Old Queen’s manor is public is a typical example of the Old Queen’s head. This was formerly the ‘Hall in the Ponds’ and was probably a manor house in Sheffield deer park which was a prominent part of the Old Queen’s manor. It is the only remaining public house which stands in Derby Road. The east and west wings of this manor house are timber-framed and were built between 1500-1550.

The most commonly surviving type of timber-framed building within the Sheffield area is the timber-framed house. In a timber-framed building, the weight is carried on pairs of running timbers called cruck beams that met near the ground and met at the apex of the roof. The ground floor was usually selected as the original upper standard trees. One of the best surviving cruck buildings in Sheffield is Oak Fold Barn which stands at the entrance to Conisdale Park.

Sheffield’s coppice woods also provided the raw materials for a bewildering variety of crafts and industries. Since oak poles made good props, oak bark was used for making the liquor used by leather tanners to make the animal skins pliable by working; hawthorn woods were used in basket making; ashes were used in basket making; willows, which was easy to work and waterproof, made excellent straining and ash-pitching for the brush and tool handles. Holly was grown in special woods for holly ‘boughs’, and the holly leaves were collected and dried to provide ‘fast fodder’ for sheep, cattle and deer in the winter. And the holly was made into holly brooms and bunched together to make faggots for heating buildings or for protecting river banks. The brushwood was burned and the burnt wood ash used by the local people to make manure. Another important fuel made from coppice wood between the 1570-1790 was charcoal which was produced in a mixture with charcoal in lead smelting. Whitecoal was small shovels of wood, dried in a kiln until all the moisture was driven out. The remains of whitecoal were widely used in many of the woods in the south of the city in the form of large depressions, usually on sloping ground.

This leaflet has been devised, written and illustrated by Mel and Joan Jones, with the map by Bob Wathurst.

An acknowledgement to the Head of Leisure Services, Sheffield City Council, for permission to reproduce the ‘Nutters’ poster from the Burnley Arts Festival 1990.
Sheffield's ancient woodland heritage:

When people in other parts of the country hear for the first time about Sheffield's ancient woodlands, their first thought is 'sticky dust', then surprise, and finally envy. There are upwards of eighty ancient woodlands within Sheffield's city boundaries, including one Ecclesall Woods - of nearly 500 acres (121 hectares). What other British city can match these statistics? The answer is none. Sheffield is the best wooded city in the country. The surviving woodlands are reminders of the city's long industrial history, being the source of charcoal and wood fuel, the shelter, the windbreak and largest-user of its smelting fuels. And the resident indicator is almost always aware of the woods in the landscape even though they cover only a small fraction of the total area. The woods correct the curve and back slopes of the highest edges, and on lower ground they hang on steep valley sides almost into the heart of the urban area.

Characteristics of Sheffield's Ancient Woodlands:

Ancient woodlands are often in the farthest corners of parishes and townships, often right on the boundary. In the Clayfield's valley we find a number of ancient woods, including Hung Burh (steep slope), Roatburn Wood and Leas Hall Wood that adjoin on the Miers Brook which means 'boundary stream'. This used to be not only the boundary between Sheffield and Norton parishes, but also the ancient boundary between South Yorks and Derbyshire, and before that the boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia. Ancient woods are 'left-overs' that have been attacked by axe over a very long period of time. Sheffield's ancient woodland boundaries, therefore, tend to be sinuous or zig-zagged.

The distribution of trees and shrubs in ancient woods varies rapidly in response to soil and drainage conditions. An ancient wood is full ofsurprises as tree species suddenly disappear and others take their place within a short distance. Woolley Wood is perhaps the most varied of Sheffield's ancient woods. Sessile oak, with its stalked leaves and unrolled acorns, gives way to single specimens or small groups of native rowan, ash, alder, silver birch, downy birch, wych elm, holly, hawthorn and hazel and gnarled trees, such as beech, pendant chestnut and lime. But most glorious of all is the native wild cherry which is in full blossom in April.

One of the greatest pleasures of visiting an ancient wood is to see the shafts of sunlight on the petals of wild flowers in spring and early summer. Many of these woodland flowers are rarely found outside ancient woods. This is because they are generally slow colonisers. The bluebell is the best known of these ancient woods flowers, and it is often widely distributed wild flowers that grow on the ancient sites and found throughout the city. Sheffield's ancient woods include wood sorrel, wood garlic, gentian, wood sorrel, yellow archangel, yellow gipsywort, meadow saxifrage, and the aromatic grasses wood melick and wood millet.

About ninety species of bird nest in woodland in Britain and the largest ancient woodland in Sheffield can support between 45-55 breeding species. And the breeding birds of Sheffield's ancient woods build their nests in every habitat: crowns, herons and among the insects of Sheffield's ancient woods the butterflies, for example, the brimstone, the holly blue and the increasingly widespread speckled wood are the most conspicuous, but the most interesting woodland insect in the wood which is restricted to the woods at Creswell. Their nets, sometimes more than a meter across and a foot or two high made from twigs, leaf fragments, leaf and grass stalks, soil and last but not least, simply seeking with life, are found on the south-facing edges of paths and rides to catch as much sun as possible.

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