PLACE-NAME

The Birley Stone area

NATURAL HISTORY

Old photographs show that the Birley Edge on either side of Whaigley Hill near the Birley Stone was once much broader than it is today. In fact, it is said that the woodland was dominated by birch but with occasional oaks, ash, yew, sycamore, beech, hawthorn, crab apple and holly. But even then, and more obviously to the north of Whaigley Hill on the footpaths in the direction of Hunter House and Prior Reed, the landscape is dominated by heathland vegetation which reflects the dry and acid conditions on the steep edge underlain by sandstones. There are sheets of bracken, small patches of bilberry and heather, and strands of heather and gorse, the latter rarely out of flower, giving rise to the old proverb ‘when gorse is out of blossom, kissing is out of fashion’!

A crosscut in 1946!

Some of the local place-names contain elements of Danish Viking origin. Greeno in Greeno, for example, is made up of the Anglo-Saxon element gield (meaning grove). In addition, the Old Norse word and (meaning grove) given means a grove.

Lastly it would be unfair to leave this historic landscape without considering the Old House. The Old House was built in 1774 and was the home of the Lord of the Manor, Lord Mountstuart. It is a three storeyed stone and brick building with five rooms. It was originally the seat of the Dukes of Montagu, who were the Earls of Salisbury and Lords of the Manor. The house is now a private residence and is not open to the public.

The area also has a rich and varied bird life. In winter there are mixed parties of tits, flocks of fieldfares and redwings and a variety of finches, wheatears and linnet. In late spring and summer, the latter is the songbird that attracts the attention of the resident blackbird, hedge sparrow and yellowhammer and the migrant chiffchaff, willow warbler and tree pipit. Traynott and green woodpecker also nest in the area. If you are very lucky, and have a pair of binoculars, you may even see the occasional buzzard circling high above Whaigley Hill.

Anchors the butterflies that may be seen, the most notable is the speckled wood, a fairly recent arrival that has spread north from the edge of the Coal Measures. Mammals are much less obviously seen. If you go out on a moonlit night in the springtime and listen you may hear the occasional looshing call of the pipistrelle bat. There are several other areas of Access Land around Sheffield, for the most up to date information on Access Land nationwide please visit the website of the Countryside Agency at www.countryside.gov.uk. This leaflet has been designed and written by Mo and Pam Jones with the map and illustrations by Boo Environment. The field of Yorkshire Activity, David Divet, Adrian Ollerton, George Robinson and Fiona Naylor are all acknowledged.

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MEDIEVAL MARKER

Lying at 816 feet (249 metres) above the Don valley, the Dryden's Mark is an important medieval boundary. It was first recorded as ‘Balebritte’ in 1176, a mark on a map known as the ‘Mark of London’ between Richard de Lestorot, lord of the manor of Hallamshire, and Adam, the keeper of the Abbey of St Wulfran in Normandy. This abbey had been granted land in the ancient parish of Eckington and monks from the abbey had found a metal pickaxe called ‘Byd’ from 1273. At this boundary agreement, the monks were to have the freedom to pasturage their flocks of sheep and cattle from January to August in a great wood that covered the valley side as far as the Don (the River Dore) from Wirksworth (Watnall) to Windover (Dungworth). The monks were also permitted to pasturage their swine on the fallen acorns in the same wood in the autumn. The remains of this great wood remain as Wilson Spring Wood and Beeley Wood.

The base of the stone may be the original medieval one, but the shaft is later. Indeed, the original stone may not have been a straight stone shaft, but a stone cross to mark the way from Eckington to Dungworth and Dugbridge and beyond. In this case it probably already stood in its present position when the 1101 boundary agreement was made. In this case it probably already stood in its present position when the 1101 boundary agreement was made. The stone was 18 feet long and 4 feet wide. It had a high water mark between the Gresford and Southy quaters of Eckington parish.

THE IMPACT OF GEOLOGY
ON THE LANDSCAPE

Birley Stone and the surrounding area is part of the Pennine ‘stone country’. Solid rock can be seen everywhere in the side of the road opposite the Birley Stone. On a short walk to the south along the footpath towards Black Edge outcrop of rock abounded and soon the path is divided by mounds of soil and rock waste from disused quarries. And everywhere are dry stone walls dividing one field from another. This is because the long slope from Birley Edge down to the River Don is underlain by thin layers of coal inter-bedded with sands and massive beds of coal measure sandstones – dry stone walls of Wirksworth (Watnall) to Windover (Dungworth). The monks were also permitted to pasturage their swine on the fallen acorns in the same wood in the autumn. The remains of this great wood remain as Wilson Spring Wood and Beeley Wood.

What is hidden from the observer is the impact of the quarrying underground. The many centuries old rural landscape that spreads out before the visitor is in fact lidded with a honeycomb of mine workings, entered in their working days not by shafts but in the form of drift mines, known locally as day holes. These were brick-lined instances straight into the ‘Nickle’, and the main miner mined for two centuries was not coal but ganister. This is in the granite-shale terrane that occupies the natural landscape of the valley. The mine workings were ground into a powder, which was mixed to a slurry and allowed to fill the drift mines. The resulting bricks, there were bricks to the line of the interior of steel furnaces – refractory bricks.

THE WAR YEARS

The Second World War also made its temporary mark on the landscape around the Birley Stone. The area to the east of the Birley Stone, now isolated from the rest of the country, was converted into an ammunition depot with the ammunition hidden underground in grass covered bunkers. Here were stored the bombs used in raids on Hitler’s Germany and taken on the way of convoys of lorries to the aircraft park at East Grinstead. All that is left to remind us of this is part of the war effort and a memorial to the workers that worked in the ammunition depot of the site. This memorial is nearby the Birley Stone, on the edge of the copse, a boundary stone with the initials W.D (War Department) on the far side.

There was also a small army unit billeted at Lane Head House to the north-east of the Birley Stone. The lieutenant and his platoon were stationed there to operate the aerial sights and adjacent Lewis gun positioned in two sandbagged pits in the copse as a perimeter to protect the Birley Stone. The family at Lane Head House (the Robinson) who lived in the mens’ accommodation during the air raid but Mr Robinson was sometimes called out to repair the Lewis gun when the mechanism jammed. The Robinson children had grandstand views of the Sheffield Blitz in 1940.

THE FESTIVAL STONE

Beside the Birley Stone stands the Festival Stone, so-called because it looks out over the border with the Derbyshire District Council (Gresford) until 1974 was not part of the city of Derby. This stone is now part of the English border with Derbyshire. It was built in 1951. This is topped by what has virtually been a Yorkshire lozenge and an iron bar. The stone has an iron bar. The stone has an iron bar. This display showing the direction and distance of the stone of natural and built landmarks.

It cannot be stressed enough that the Birley Stone is not only an important heritage site but also a wonderful vintage point to the south and west there are clear views over Sheffield including especially the Sheffield ski slopes, the football stadium, the University Arts Tower, the whole of the city centre with the tower hall and the old town, the old West Riding houses, the local churches, the Grange and beyond to the Clifden valley and Norton Water Tower and Harwell. Running to the west and north west is the rolling hill country between Waddens and Bolsterstone, an area of outstanding beauty in which the small stone quarries yield the idyll, the leading lights, the isolated farms and valley woods form a perfect complement to the natural landscape. The stone of the Festival Stone signifies the presence of the county of South Yorkshire and firmly enforces the identity of the stone and the stone of the Festival Stone.

main paths  Access Land boundary

to their Edge