VISITING WHEATA WOOD AND PRIOR ROYD

Access to the two woods is free and unrestricted at all times. There is a well-developed network of footpaths and bridleways through the woods. The main footpaths and bridleways are wide and are suitable for pushchairs. Steps are gentle except in the western part of Prior Royd. There are also wide, well-maintained tracks for horse riders, all of which are signed.

There is a car park at the Community Centre in Grenoside and at the northern entrance to Wood Hall a mile north of the Old Red Line (see map). There is also limited roadside parking at the top of Bower Lane. First bus service 81 goes to Grenoside.

The first impression after walking for a few minutes in either of the two woods is that you are walking through a canopy of trees with almost impenetrable undergrowth in the north of England and in the uplands. There is much silver birch (Betula pendula) growing into the (Arctic) Circle and downy birch, and pear (or mountain ash) are quite common.

The woodland floor is mainly covered by tufts of wavy hair grass with occasional clumps of heather and patches of heather. The well-drained soil and the climate caused the two woods to be particularly heathie. The photography is by Joan Jones.

The bird population of the two woods is very varied. In winter there is a mixed party of tits and finches of redwings, fieldfares, siskins, redpolls and chaffinches. In summer, migrant warblers such as blackcaps, willow warblers and chiffchaffs are widely distributed. The dark green goldcrest is very common. Other species likely to be encountered include nuthatch, sparrowhawk and the most sought woodpecker.

The other main trees native to the site are oak, mainly oaks, oak, recognised from its darkly and unisected acorns, and holly which appears as thick clumps of shrubbery. Occasionally the climber honeysuckle, which flowers gloriously in June, scrambles over low shrubs and trees.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, much planting of trees not native to the area mainly beech and sweet chestnut, took place in Whamcliffe Wood. It was in this period that the area was extended as a narrow plantation alongside Woodhall Road. Conifers occurred in two small areas: in the western part of Wheata Wood there is a small plantation of Scots pine, and larch has been planted at the northern end of the most northerly extension of Prior Royd.

In spring and early summer the woodland flowers enhanced their value for wildlife and local people alike. A few bluebells and flowering plants attracted many bees and other ancient woods because their colours and scents encourage to colonise new sites. These include bluebell, wood anemone, wood sorrel, wood-seddock, wild garlic (ramsons) and anemone nemorosa, the common cow-wheat.

Another noteworthy feature of the two woods is the large contingent of bramble. When the woods were managed as coppice it was important to keep growing stems and decrease the heat on the woods when the coppice was young. There is a large variety of wild garlic and many animals being taken from the woods around Grenoside and I m p o u n d e d in the village pitkin. A fine then had to be paid before they were released. There is a surviving village pits, near Bower Lane, new part of a garden.
ANCIENT WOODS

The archaeological evidence that shows that Wheata Wood is an ancient secondary woodland is so subtle that it is only discernible to a professional archaeologist. The evidence is in the form of a series of ridges (called linear), low stone banks and the remains of a section of a broad wall. The features are so eroded and covered by vegetation, it is thought they represent the remnants of an ancient field system dating from the Romano-British period (1st to 4th centuries AD).

The meaning of the names of the two woods

The most likely explanation of the name ‘Wheata’ in Wheata Wood is that it is the name of a tenant or freeman whose farmland included the wood. It is recorded in a surviving document written at Wheata Medieval Court held on 2 February 1444 that William Whett, son and heir of John Whett, was holding to a house and land called Birley Holins and a clearing (‘asain’) called Andrew Carl. These two names are shared again in Wheata Wood, in other deeds Whett is spelled Whited and Wheata is Wheata Wood.

The past management of the two woods

From the seventeenth century, and probably for long before that, until towards the end of the nineteenth century, the two woods were managed as spring woods. Prior Royd, as Prior Hall, was listed among 49 spring woods in Sheffield and Rotherham in a document written for the 7th Earl of Shrewsbury between 1592 and 1616, and Wheata Wood was described as a spring wood of 25 years growth in a survey of the manor of Sheffield in 1637.

A spring wood was a coppice wood or more proportionately a coppice-with-standard, where the standard trees with standards most of the trees were periodically cut down to ground level to what is called a stool and from the stool grew multiple stems.

Wool and woodland crafts and industries

The reason why the woods were managed as coppice-with-standards for so long was because there were different markets for different timber trees. Timber trees were for building projects such as the coach barn (now still standing) at Prior Royd Farm. There is a record in 1682 of a tree being felled in Prior Royd to provide planks for the floor of a farm tenant’s warehouse (where he stored his carpentry and his hayloft). And in 1718 a tenant at one of the Duke of Norfolk’s water-powered sawmills (Brampton Sawmill) cut 110 trees from Wheata Wood for his timber requirements.

A process for the coppice poles was for making charcoal which was the fuel for iron makers until the late eighteenth century and for some steel makers well into the nineteenth century.

Oak poles made strong pit props and the bark of the oak timber trees and coppice poles was picked for leather tanners. Ash and hazel poles made good spring brush and tool handles and beech Brushwood was used for making broom cobs.

In the nineteenth century the Sharpes’ family of Crescote were specialists in making swill or swine baskets which were woven out of lengths of thirty splint oak. The oak was sold to make it easier to split and there is a record of George Sharp selling a long metal bath from Nether-Charnock Fernwalks at Thornhill in which to boil his oak poles. ‘Sharp’s wood’, a small wood where they obtained their water supply, still survives in Crescote Wood.

Members of the Dransfield family of Crescote were clog sole makers. William Dransfield senior, born in Norton Fitzwilliam, embalmed on his apprenticeship as a woodman in Done in 1609, at the age of fifteen, before he went to Crescote. He and his father was also called William, who died in 1696, operamed from the ‘woodward’ at the entrance to Crescote Wood, which was just below the top of Bower Lane. Besides making clog soles, they also made brush heads, tools and tool handles.

The area was then abandoned and rewooded. The surrounding area was cleared over a long period of time at banning Wheata Wood at Prior Royd as woods in a farmed landscape. The shapes of the two woods, with squiggy and sinuous boundaries are typical of ancient woods—woods that have been created by the slow removal of the surrounding woodland over a long period of time. The names of the surrounding fields tell of the history of the wood and may include references exclusively from wood or common, still prospered woodland use, pole making and stool remaining, and rod (wood clearing).

The name Prior Royd is doubly interesting. ‘Prior’ refers to the fact that during the medieval period until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s it was the property of the monks of St Walburga’s. John Prior, who had set up a priory of monks in Crescote around 1200, was the property of foreign religious houses, of St Andrew’s, and ‘Royd’ does not mean wood but means clearing and this refers to the farm settlement there called the wood.

By the early seventeenth century both woods had come into the hands of the earsl of Shrewsbury and thence to the successors of the dukes of Norfolk.

The past century the two woods were gradually incorporated into cattle enclosures with all the trees were single-stemmed and grown on a level plantation. Planting of non-native trees also took place.

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Wheata Wood and Prior Royd are examples of what woodland historians call ancient woods. They mean that they have been in existence since at least AD 1600. If ever only after 1600 that people in this country planted trees to create woods.

What this means is that an ancient wood is either a primary woodland or an ancient secondary woodland.

Primary woods are direct descendents of the primeval forest that grew up from about 11,000 years ago after the end of the last ice age. They are the remnants of the original ‘wildwood’ that existed before our ancestors started to clear them for settlement and for plough land and grazing for their domestic animals.

An ancient secondary woodland is a wood that for some time before 1600 was cleared of trees and used for settlement or farming, but which at some later date, again before 1600, became woodland again because settlement or farming was abandoned and reversion to woodland took place.

Wheata Wood, on fairly level land, and containing archaeological evidence that suggests that a large part of the site was the site of an ancient farming landscape, is mainly an ancient secondary woodland. On the other hand, the very north west corner, parts of Prior Royd could be primary woodland.

1801 Census extract for Lumpy Lane, Crescote

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