

Bell Bank & Woolley Bank Woods, Barnsley.

Bell Bank Wood comprises a narrow belt of woodland, located along the eastern side of the A61 Sheffield to Barnsley road. The wood lies approximately 3 kilometres south of the centre of Barnsley and close to Worsbrough Mill and, along with nearby Woolley Bank Wood, forms part of Worsbrough Mill Country Park.



The woodland edge of Bell Bank Wood, looking north.

Bell Bank Wood is known from documentary and other evidence to be an ancient woodland, that is, one that has been in existence for at least 400 years. It was once part of a much larger area of ancient woodland, which covered the Rockley Valley and continued eastwards along the River Dove. This much greater stretch of woodland, known originally as Rockley Woods, was

an ancient woodland where deer were hunted in Norman times. Today it is divided into a number of smaller woods; Old Park Wood west of Birdwell, Wigfield and Miller Hill Woods which are split by the M1, Shaw Bank Wood and, on the eastern side of the A616, Bell Bank, with its southward extension of Fir walk Plantation, and Woolley Bank Woods. Adjoining land has been purchased by the Woodland Trust and is being planted as **Birdwell Wood** so that in the future the woods will once again be joined to form a larger block of broadleaved woodland stretching from Birdwell to Worsbrough Reservoir.

The topography of Bell Bank Wood consists of a steep northwest facing slope in the south, broadening to the north before again steepening as it continues into Woolley Bank Wood, where it forms the steep valley side of the River Dove. The underlying geology is predominantly the coal measures.

SURVIVALS OF AN INDUSTRIAL PAST

The local woodlands have long been associated with iron making. Now buried beneath the M1 is the site of **Rockley Smithies**, a medieval bloomery where water power was used to power the blowers and hammers. Here local iron and charcoal were used to heat and hammer the iron into a 'bloom' of wrought iron.

Nearby, however, is a rare survival. The [Rockley blast furnace](#) which stands in the woods near Rockley Abbey Farm, was built in 1652 on three acres of ground leased from Francis Rockley, to smelt the local iron ore. It was worked until the 1740s by the Spencer syndicate of ironmasters of Cannon Hall, Cawthorne.



Rockley Blast Furnace

The blast furnace, which was first introduced to this country from the continent in 1496, used the strong draught produced by a long chimney to achieve a



This painting of a Blast Furnace in the Woods was painted in 1610 by Jan Bruegel. It gives a very clear impression of how the Rockley furnace would have looked in use.

high temperature. It was therefore possible to actually melt the iron and run it off at the bottom into sand beds to make 'pigs' of cast iron.

The furnace used charcoal from the local woods as fuel. It was in 17098 that Abraham Derby developed the method of smelting iron with coke at Coalbrookdale but this method was only slowly adopted in this area and it was not until about 1770 that coke was first used in South Yorkshire. The Rockley furnace may well have been brought into use again in about 1790, fuelled by coke, to produce gun castings.

What survives is the stack with an inner lining of heat resisting sandstone blocks, but the hearth itself and most of the dressed stone outer facings have gone. To the south side is the charging bank which was linked to the furnace top by a bridge.

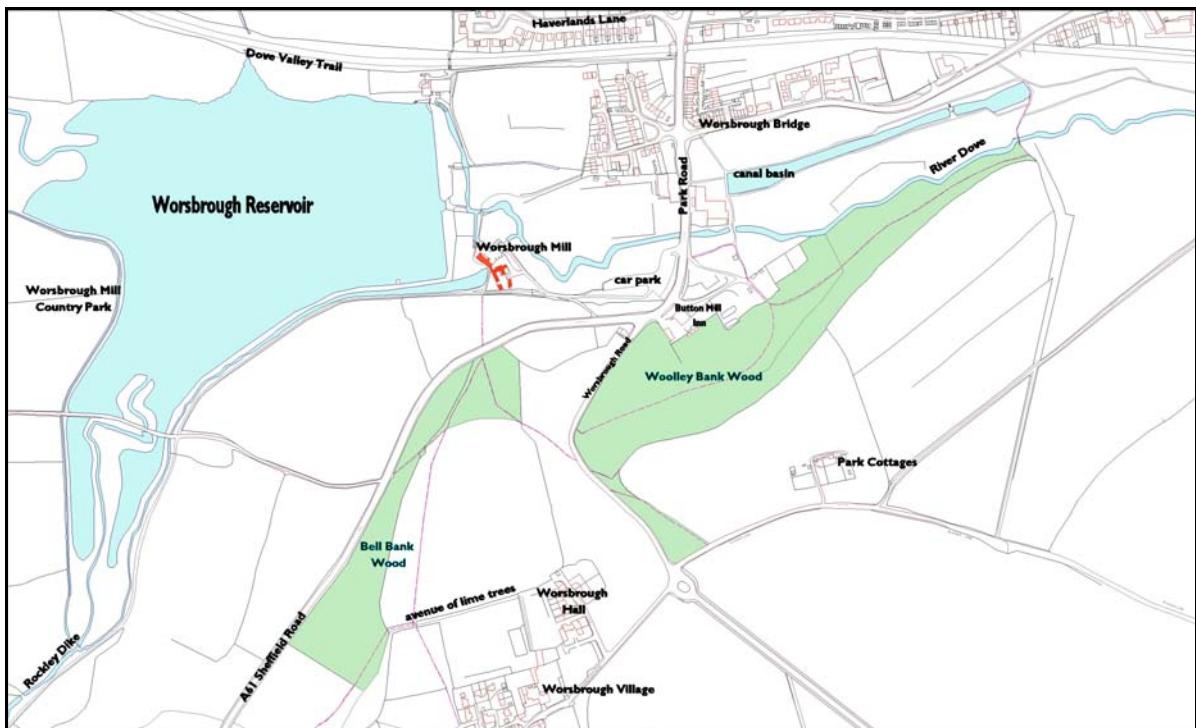
Near to the Rockley Furnace, in the same piece of woodland, stands the even more imposing tall, castellated building of the [Rockley Engine House](#). This is an engine house which was built, according to the datestone, in 1813, to house a Newcommon engine which was used to pump water from the nearby iron workings.

The engine itself was said to have been moved to another mine in the Chapeltown area in 1870.

Both of these historic structures are now owned by the South Yorkshire Industrial History Society.



Rockley Engine House, 1813.

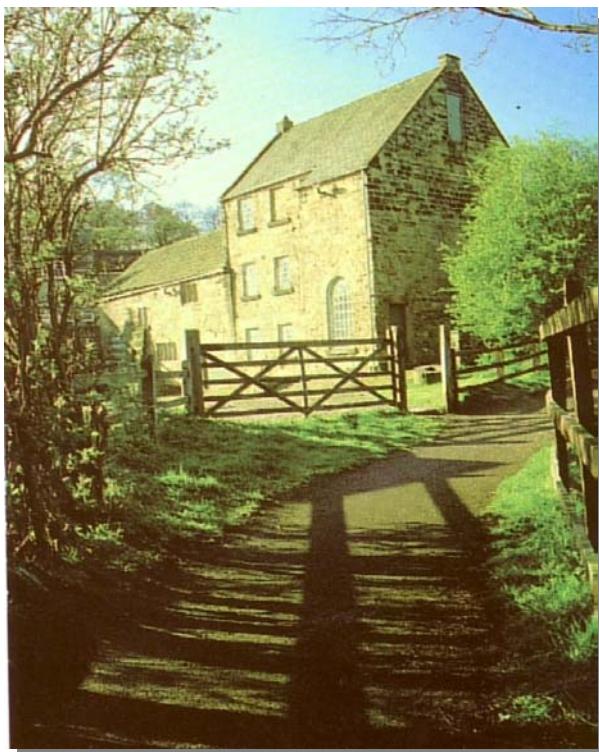


Map showing Location and Extent of Bell Bank and Woolley Bank Woods.



Aerial View showing the same area as the map Above.

Bell Bank and Woolley Bank Woods form part of the extensive Worsbrough Country Park, at the heart of which stands the historic **Worsbrough Corn Mill**, a 17th century water powered mill which still grinds corn for visitors today. The mill is on the same site as a mill which was listed in the Domesday book, so corn may well have been milled here since Norman times!



In Worsbrough Village churchyard there is a particularly unusual gravestone which relates to the local woodland.

It is the memorial to Matthew Ogden of Birdwell, whose trade, the inscription tells us, was 'besom maker'. He died in 1824 at the age of 76.

Besom making was a widespread local woodland craft into the 20th century as besoms, or birch brooms, were indispensable for sweeping flagged floors and yards. The handles were made from young ash or hazel poles and the brooms

from bundles of birch or hazel twigs bound with strips of willow.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although no prehistoric finds have been made within the woods themselves a flint blade, now in Sheffield Museum, was discovered to the south of Bell Bank in Fir Walk Plantation in 1993. The earliest references to the woods refer to 'Beubanke' in 1562. It is probable that this refers to the bell pits, shallow coal or ironstone mines, dating from this time. The name 'Woolley' is even older, deriving from the Domesday term 'Wiluelai' which generally meant 'a forest glade frequented by wolves'!

There are two significant local features which date from medieval times. The first is the superb St. Mary's church in the village of Worsbrough itself. This grade I listed building still retains a Norman chancel and a vast range of medieval monuments.

The second feature is more enigmatic, consisting of an unusual underground chamber measuring 15 feet by 10 feet by 6 feet with a Tudor-style window in the north wall. It was discovered during the

demolition of some 18th century cottages near the mill. The purpose of the chamber is unknown for definite but there was a tradition that the cottages were on the site of a medieval 'lock up'.

The road from Worsbrough village to the Bridge, which today divides the two woods, was formerly the main road to Birdwell. It seems to have its origins as a medieval trackway. In 1840 the road was rerouted to its present configuration under an act of Parliament, to take it away from Worsbrough hall. The hall itself is an attractive 17th century house with two projecting wings.

Industrial developments in the early 19th century had a huge impact on the locality and the scars of some of these remain, especially in Woolley Bank Wood. About 1840 tramways were built across the River Dove to Bell Ing Colliery, near Worsbrough Bridge, and a branch to the west went past Worsbrough Mill towards the reservoir. The line of the embankment which supported this tramway can still be followed through the north eastern edge of Woolley bank Wood.

Bell Bank Woodland

Bell Bank Wood is a semi-natural woodland and contains some large old trees of oak and ash. Felling for timber and for charcoaling occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries but compared with other woods in the locality the size of the old oaks suggests that timber extraction has been minimal in the last 100 to 150 years. There are a number of superb tall and imposing limes and sweet chestnut trees, several of which have signs of lightning strike damage.

Other trees include holly, rowan and a number of relatively young sycamore of no more than 50 years old, the latter being quite dense in some areas of the wood. Under the tree canopy, there is a prolific growth of young trees, particularly sycamore, together with extensive areas of bramble. The latter is important as a nesting habitat and as an autumn food source for animals and birds.

Because of its age and history, Bell Bank Wood contains many plants associated with ancient woodlands. In spring and early summer, it also supports a rookery.

The footpath from the old village of Worsbrough down across the field towards Bell Bank Wood crosses one of the most distinctive tree features in South Yorkshire, a superb double avenue of tall, mature lime trees, over 60 in total, which lead towards Worsbrough Hall. Watch for the kestrels which nest right at the top of one of the trees. In the spring you may be able to hear the young birds crying for food.

Part of the imposing avenue of Lime trees



Management of the Woodland

Under the *Fuelling a Revolution* programme, a programme of woodland restoration and access improvement work is taking place to restore Bell Bank Wood to its former glory and to maximise its potential as a recreational and educational resource.



Arum Lily in May, one of the distinctive plants of ancient woodlands. It has many popular names including cuckoo pint, lords and ladies and Jack in the pulpit. In late summer it has spikes of poisonous red berries.

This will entail some woodland maintenance work over the next few years. Sycamore, which is a non-native and highly invasive species, will be controlled so that natural regeneration of the native trees is encouraged. There may be some selective replanting with oak, ash, hazel and holly. Restoration work will also be required on the area of meadow at the northern end of the wood in order to improve the habitat value.

Access

Access to the wood is by way of two public rights of way which pass through it from Worsbrough Village and from the A616. Access will be opened up into areas of the woodland away from these two short sections of public footpath that already cross the wood.

The car park for the Country Park is close to the wood, and the area is also served by public transport.



Large-leaved lime, one of the distinctive trees native to South Yorkshire.

WOOLLEY BANK WOOD

Woolley Bank Wood lies along a north-west facing slope overlooking the River Dove near Worsbrough Mill. In common with nearby Bell Bank Wood, it lies approximately 3 kilometres south of the centre of Barnsley and forms part of Worsbrough Mill Country Park. The car park for the Country Park is close to the wood, and the area is also served by public transport. The wood is well served by footpaths, at least some of which are Public Rights of Way.

Woolley Bank Wood is known from documentary and other evidence to be an ancient woodland, that is, one that has been in existence for at least 400 years. It was once part of a much larger area of woodland, which covered the Rockley Valley and continued eastwards along the River Dove.

Woolley Bank Wood is a semi-natural woodland. The main native tree species are oak, ash, birch and hawthorn but there are also two replanted areas, one dominated by sycamore and the other by beech. In the section of the wood parallel with the road there is an important area of elm trees which are in good condition, free from Dutch elm disease. Some of these are growing from old coppice stools. Other trees include hazel, alder, rowan and lime.

One of the most varied areas of woodland is that which runs alongside the banks of the stream at the bottom of the wood. The close canopy at the streamside consists of some very large crack willow veterans, large ash, several huge alders and some tall elm regeneration. You will notice that many of the trees in this area have been somewhat crudely chopped about. There is

one area of sycamore coppice which has been pollarded twice in the last 50 years.

The woodland has several areas of extremely old trees, including some of the finest lime trees within the region and a huge beech coppice stool, with re-growth covering over 5 metres in circumference. This magnificent woodland feature stands at the top of the wood, near to Park Cottages and forms a superb resource for insects, fungi and mosses.



Old Horse Chestnut in Worsbrough Churchyard

The beech trees in the wood are mainly very large and mature, all at the very end of their life spans. Indeed, some have already failed and lay as fallen trees, others are unsafe and some have suffered vandal damage.

There is a relatively sparse shrub layer which has a mixture of young trees, shrubs and bramble, the latter being particularly dense under the planted sycamore at the western end of the wood. The ground

under the dense canopy of the mature beeches is bare and unfortunately creates ideal conditions for motorcycle trespass which causes further damage to the paths and vegetation.

On the eastern side of the road, between the Lodge and the Old Button Mill pub there are a number of very large horse chestnuts

On the woodland floor are various plants commonly associated with areas of ancient woodland. One non-native plant which forms a distinctive feature of the woodland is the large amount of Himalayan balsam which has colonised it. This is an attractive tall plant with pink flowers and fascinating explosive seed cases but it is unfortunately competing with the native woodland plants.



Himalayan Balsam, an attractive but invasive foreigner. The ripe seed pods explode when touched, showering seeds over a wide area.

MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Under the *Fuelling a Revolution* programme, a programme of woodland restoration and access improvement work is taking place to restore Woolley Bank Wood to its former

glory and to maximise its potential as a recreational and educational resource.

The whole of the woodlands have had virtually no management for at least 25 years and the closed canopy means that there is little natural regeneration of oak and ash and the wood is reaching single age status. Sycamore, a non-native and highly invasive species, will be thinned, and native species such as oak, ash and hazel will be encouraged. The age range of trees in the woodland will be broadened by the selective thinning of young trees, by the coppicing of selected oaks and ashes, and by managing the willows found adjacent to the river Dove.

Great care will be taken during these operations to ensure that none of the historical features such as earthworks and ancient boundaries will be disturbed.

It is hoped that some of the timber, especially the high quality sycamore, will be marketed but most of the beech is over mature and is of little value as timber. Its ecological value, however, will increase.

Access

Although the woodland is already quite well served by footpaths, there is a need to improve certain sections of these, especially to encourage access by a wider range of people than use the woodland at present.

In order to raise awareness of the history and natural history, recreational potential and management of the wood, a programme of educational and interpretative events is being run at the site.

