Wincobank & Hinde Common Woods

WINCOBANK WOOD

Wincobank Wood lies on the west-facing slope of the Wincobank ridge, which creates a most striking landscape feature, dominating the Don Valley. It is this hill which rises so prominently behind Meadowhall shopping centre. The woodland provides a significant area of open space in an otherwise heavily urbanised area, just over 4 kilometres north-east of the centre of Sheffield.

It is a complex and fascinating site, with a history stretching back into ancient antiquity.

The View from the top of Wincobank Hill looking West towards the City Centre

WINCOBANK HILL

The rocks which form Wincobank Hill are narrow bands of shales, coal seams and sandstones which are heavily faulted as they dip steeply towards the Don Valley before levelling out under the valley floor itself. The result is the prominent hog's back ridge feature, with good all-round views, which created an ideal location for occupation in prehistoric times. The top of the hill is dry with thin, easily eroded soil, and the rocks which create this landscape poke through the surface. Amongst these it is easy to pick up a piece of rusty looking sandstone that is heavily impregnated with iron, a clue to some of the hill's early occupants.

The view from the summit of the hill today, overlooking the Meadowhall Retail Centre, the M1 motorway viaduct, the survivals of the great steel factories of the Don Valley and the modern sporting and entertainment venues, is monumental. To the west Sheffield city centre lies in the hollow beneath Park Hill and beyond stretch the outlines of the Pennine moorlands.

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the view would have been quite different for Wincobank Hill was renowned as a haven of rural tranquillity, as indicated by the following poem written by a local admirer called John Nixon, in the nineteenth century.

Wincobank Hill **by John Nixon,**
19th Century. Sheffield City Libraries.

When summer comes on and the sweet month of June,
With its lovely attractions puts all things in tune,
If the artist should try he would fail in his skill,
To pencil the beauties of Wincobank Hill.

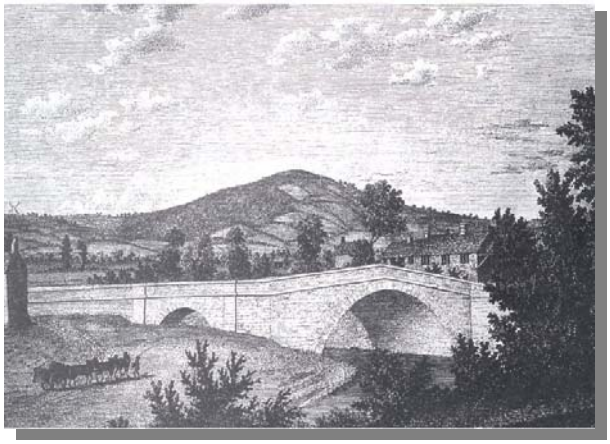
On natures vast grandeurs we look with delight,
The scene all around is a beautiful sight,
The flowers with fragrance the air they do fill,
These are the productions of Wincobank Hill.

How lovely, delightful, transporting it looks,
All around we see forests, meadows and brooks,
Where sweet purling waters down the valley do rill,
These are the beauties of Wincobank Hill.

No noise nor confusion through the district is heard
But the sweet noise of the warbling bird.
The schoolboys with echoes the air they do fill,
That is all that molests us on Wincobank Hill.

Then who would not wish on this hill to reside,
Where nature shines forth in the noblest of pride.
Our hearts unto Him should with gratitude fill,
Who gives us these blessings on Wincobank Hill.

Great changes, however, were about to take place with the building of the Sheffield and Tinsley Canal in 1819 and the Sheffield to Rotherham railway line in 1838. By the middle of the century heavy industry and workers housing had spread down the Don Valley and, although the steep terrain restricted development to the lower slopes of the hill, the prospect was changed dramatically.



The view of Wincobank Hill from Washford Bridge by D. Martin, 1791.

Open areas near the town were becoming valued for their recreational value and in 1875 Mark Firth opened nearby Firth Park, a large area of the Page Hall estate, then on the edge of the town. There were moves to develop new features to encourage Victorian visitors to Wincobank Hill. At the end of the century George Parkin built, near to the top of the hill, what became known as 'Wincobank Castle', a fifty-foot high stone built tower, to the top of which visitors could climb for a penny. The tower was unfortunately demolished in 1960.

Wincobank 'Castle'

By the early twentieth century great steel works stretched for four miles along the Don Valley below. To the observer the sight must have been impressive, especially at night, for the glow from the furnaces lit the night sky and the unceasing clamour of the steam hammers shook the ground.

There were those who did not appreciate the view for there is a reference to this, written during the First World War, that calls it 'the view over Hell Valley'

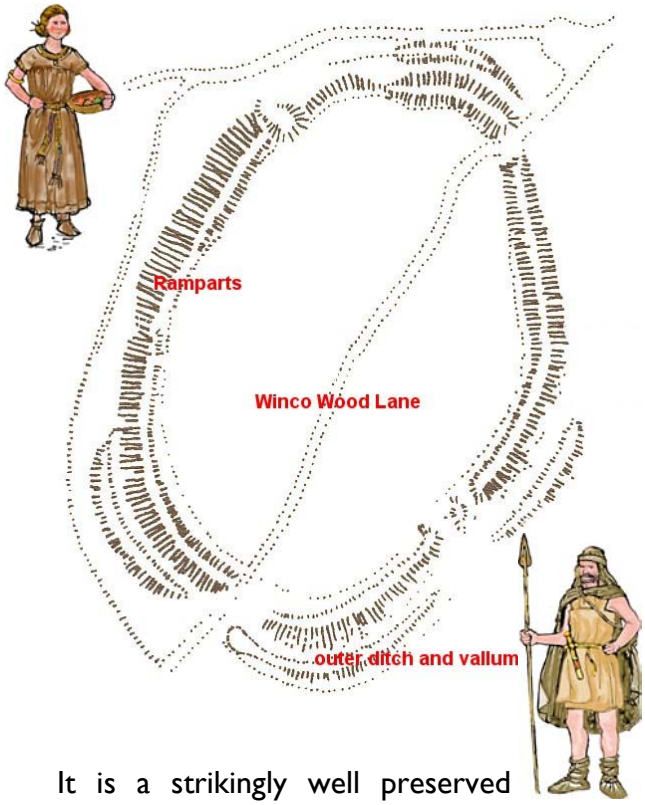
"seen at night during the war, all smoke and flame from the furnaces, all engaged in making things for killing and destruction."

Until the lower slopes of Wincobank Hill were encroached by housing developments in the early twentieth century it still retained its rural feature, as shown in Martin Davenport's print of 1908, (page 6) but with the building of the 'Flower Estate' at Shiregreen on the north side of the hill, Wincobank was encompassed entirely and became an enclave of open ground within the urban setting.

The view to the south from Wincobank Hill, looking over the Don Valley steeelworks.

THE HILLFORT

At the summit of the hill stands a hill fort dating from the iron age. The hill fort is one of a series of such fortifications that were constructed across the region. These include Mam Tor, above Castleton, Carl Wark and Castle Ring in the Peak District and Roe Wood and Caesar's Camp in Scholes Coppice.

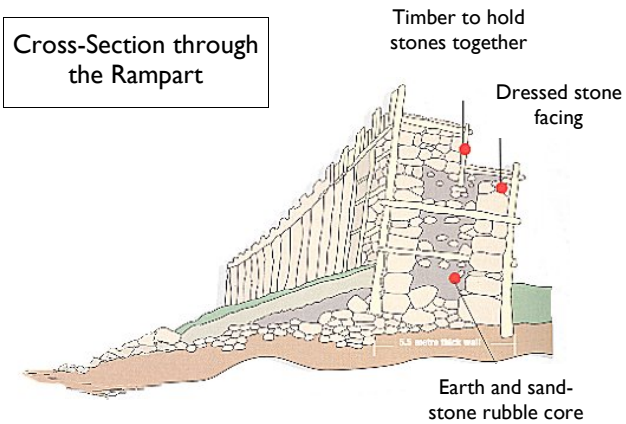


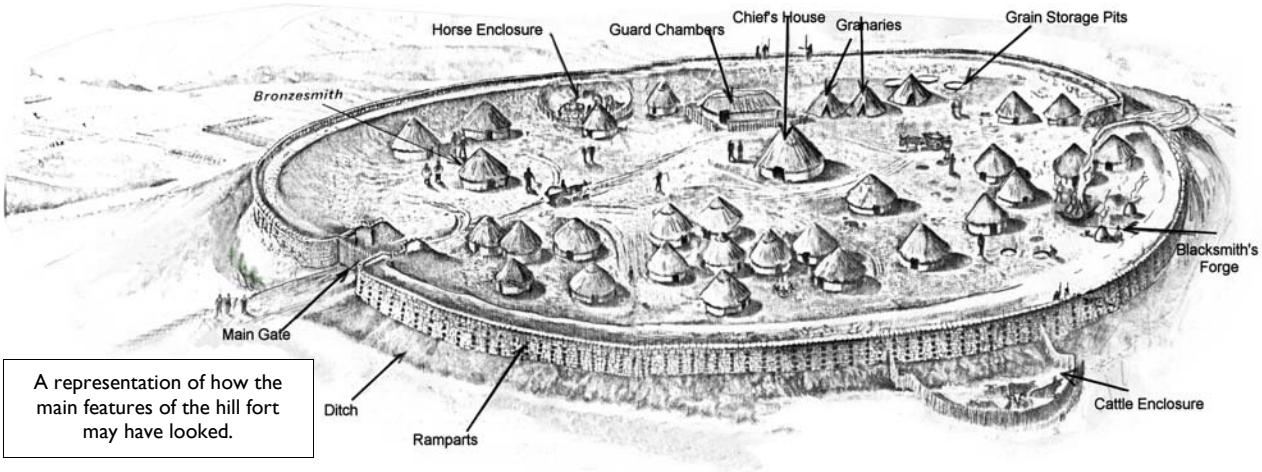
It is a strikingly well preserved monument, typically oval in shape, just over 2.5 acres in extent, consisting of a single rampart and an outer ditch. The material excavated from the ditch has been thrown onto the outside to form a further bank. A track way, known as Winco Wood Lane, runs through the site but otherwise the rampart, which rises to some 2.8 metres above the bottom of the ditch, is entire. On the north east side the outer ditch and bank have been destroyed.

There have been two excavations, in 1899 and 1979, by Sheffield City Museums. The results of the first excavation were summarised by Pauline Beswick, the Keeper of Antiquities, as follows-

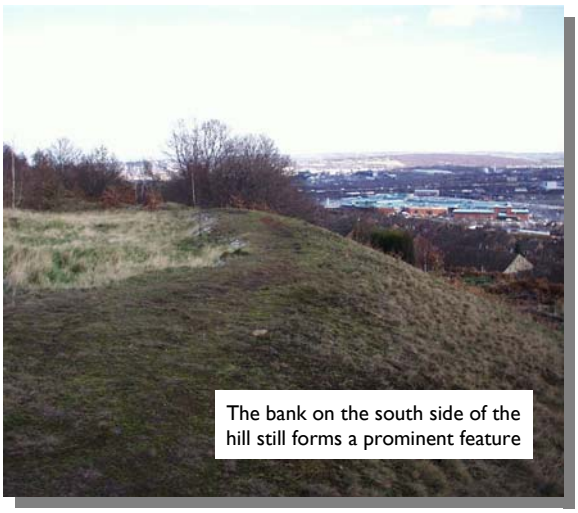
'The main rampart was originally built as stone wall 5.5 metres thick formed of a rubble and earth core bonded by timbers and faced to front and rear with large stones. From the evidence of burned and vitrified stone and timber found in the excavation and visible today in eroded patches, this rampart was destroyed by fire. The counterscarp (outer) bank was built of earth and stone probably obtained from the ditch. Roman pottery was found in the upper ditch fill on the north side. No certain evidence for an entrance gate of other features within the fort appear to have been found.'

Cross-Section through the Rampart





A representation of how the main features of the hill fort may have looked.



The bank on the south side of the hill still forms a prominent feature

Following a second excavation in 1979 radiocarbon dating of charcoal from the burned timbers taken from the rampart gave a rough date of 500BC., placing the building of this feature to the middle of the iron age. It is suggested that the stone wall was interlaced with timber to help stabilise it.

We can surmise that the destruction of the rampart in this way was an indication of conflict between the local communities.

Other finds in the locality indicate that the fort was only one point in a far longer span of occupation of Wincobank. Mesolithic and later flints (c.5000-10,000 BC) have been found on the hilltop, and there is the suggestion of bronze aged barrows on the south and west slopes. Finds further down the slopes suggest the presence of prehistoric farming settlements. These include Neolithic and Bronze Age stone implements and a number of beehive shaped corn grinding querns.

The discovery of a Roman coin about 100 yards south of the hillfort lends plausibility to the long held opinion that the fort was held by Celtic members of the Brigante tribe to oppose the northern advance of the Roman armies on this, the southern boundary of their territory. It may well have been occupied again at a later date, at the time of the building of the so-called 'Roman Ridge'.

THE ROMAN RIDGE

The remains of the Roman Ridge, the second Scheduled Ancient Monument on the hill, are more difficult to find. This enigmatic 11 mile long linear earthwork snakes its way across the northern side of the Don Valley from Wincobank to Mexbrough and has traditionally been considered to have been built in the Dark Ages between 450 and 600 AD, in order to defend the Celtic kingdom of Elmet from the advancing Anglo Saxons, following the collapse of the Roman Empire. It may, however, have been constructed long before the Roman occupation as part of the same broad defensive strategy as the hill fort, possibly in conjunction with the border disputes between the rival Celtic tribes of the Brigantes to the north and the Coritani to the south.

One man and his dog on the Roman Ridge

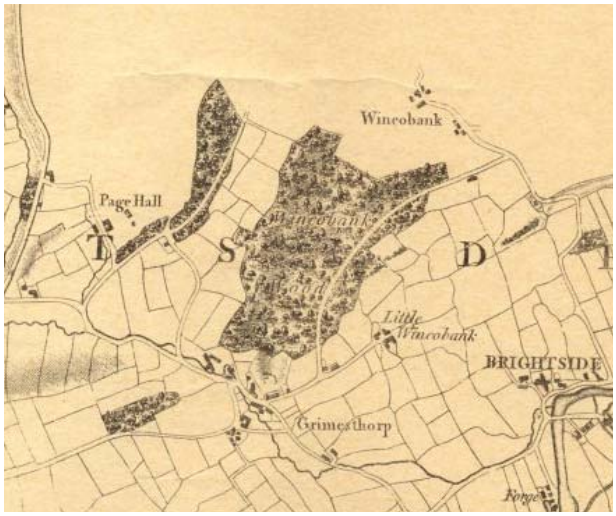
A number of the finds from the excavations at Wincobank are on display at Weston Park Museum in Sheffield.

WINCOBANK WOOD

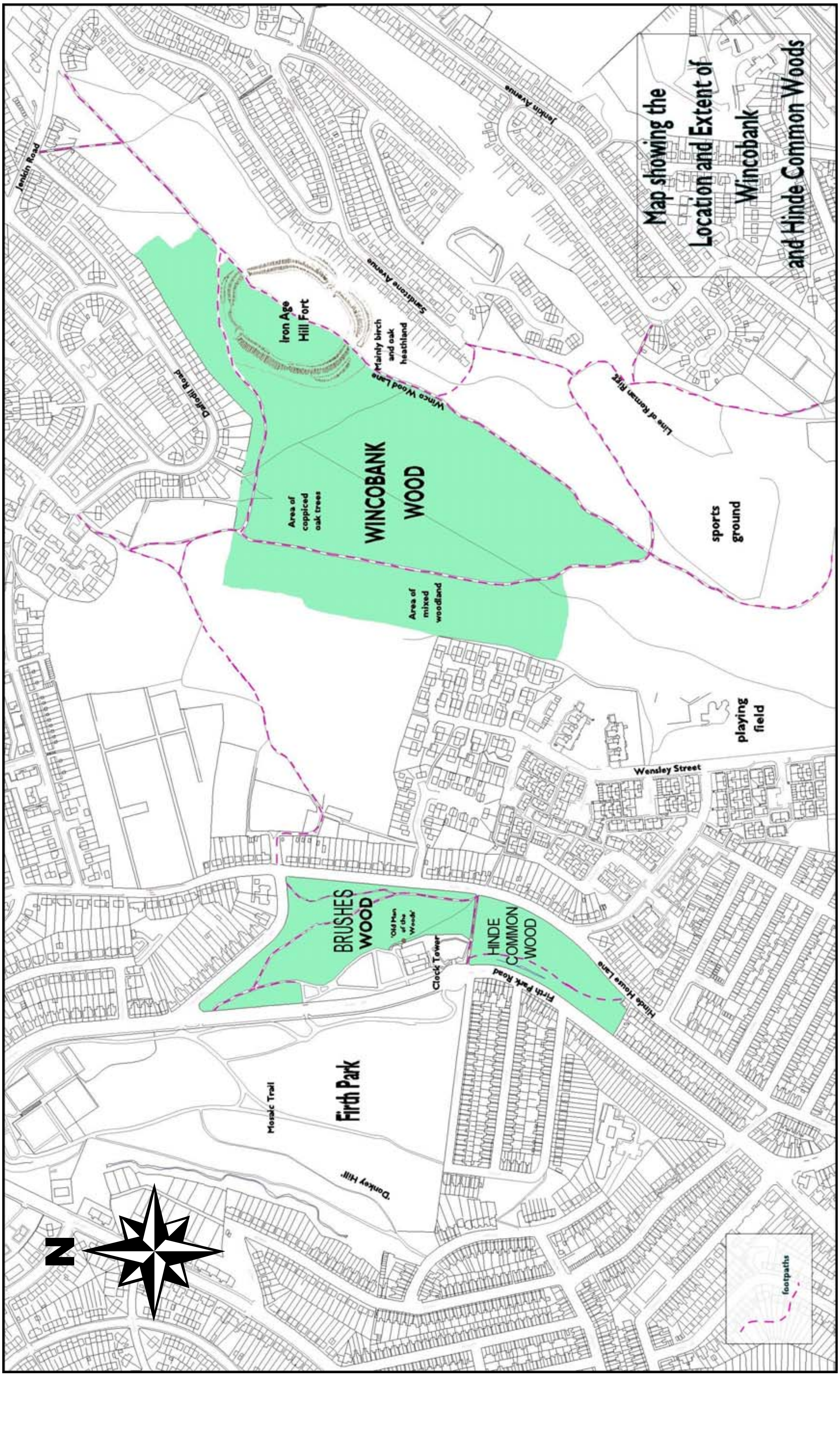
A study of the place names associated with Wincobank reveals much about the character of the place at different times. The word' Winc' is thought to refer to a Saxon personal name, Wineca. The earliest written usage of this name dates from 1345 when it was referred to as 'Winckley' meaning 'Wineca's forest clearing', giving a clear indication of the wooded nature of the surroundings. In 1442, however, a document refers to the site as 'Wincowe', a name which meant 'Wineca's mound', possibly harking back to the hill fort itself.

By Tudor times the name by which we know the hill was already fixed for there is a surviving document dated 1574 which names the farmstead on the hill 'Le Wynkeabanke'. It was around this time that we have the first reference to the management of the woodland itself. The wood formed part of the extensive estates of the Earls of Shrewsbury, the Lords of the Manor of Hallamshire, and in 1564 William Dungworth was prosecuted by the Lord and fined 12 pence for 'felling and carrying away green wood of the lord at Wincobanke without leave.' The wood appears in an inventory of the woodlands belonging to Gilbert, the 7th Earl of Shrewsbury between 1590 and 1616, in which it was called Wincobanke Springe Wood and was said to contain 60 acres of spring wood that was 14 years old. In the survey of the Manor made in 1637 for the Duke of Norfolk who had inherited the lordship, the wood was said to contain 77 acres between the boundary of Ecclesfield to the north and Grimesthorpe to the south. We therefore have a clear indication of the nature of this woodland, that had evidently extended back to cover the summit of the hill itself, as a typical piece of relic woodland surviving on the marginal land on high and steep slopes along the parish boundary.

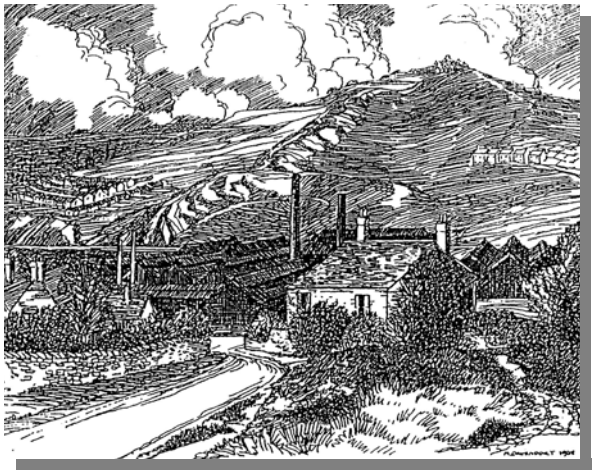
That the farmstead to the north side of the hill provided a healthy return is indicated by the fact that during the 17th century it had been extended with an extensive range of buildings, an orchard and gardens and was known as Wincobank Hall. The estate included the 'spring wood'. It is probable that the prosperity of the estate came not only from the agricultural activities but also, in common with most such local holdings, from other industrial activities, the husbandmen-cutlers alternating the tilling of their fields with the fabrication of knives and files in local smithies and mills. Along with this the hill provided building stone from small quarries and the ruins of the fort as well as coal from bell pits and charcoal from the wood. Pauline Beswick has found evidence that the charcoal was burned in pits covered by turves taken from the fort itself.



By 1810 the area of the wood was extensive, covering 81.5 acres. The outline of it can be identified very clearly from the map made by **William Fairbanks in 1795** (above) which remains identifiable to the present day. It is interesting to see that Winco Wood Lane was an established trackway through the site at this date.


Map showing the Location and Extent of Wincobank and Hinde Common Woods
Jenkin Road
Jenkin Avenue
Sandstone Avenue
Iron Age Hill Fort
Mainly birch and oak heathland
Daffodil Road
Winco Wood Lane
Line of Roman Rigg
WINCOBANK WOOD
Area of coppiced oak trees
Area of mixed woodland
sports ground
playing field
Wensley Street
BRUSHES WOOD
'Old Man of the Woods'
HINDE COMMON WOOD
Clock Tower
Firth Park Road
Hinde House Lane
Firth Park
Mosaic Trail
'Donkey Hill'
N
footpaths

The wood was divided into two areas, Great Wincoe to the west and Wincoe Holt covering the eastern third which included the area of the hill fort. Great Wincoe was managed as a coppice with standards in which the coppice was 30 years old. The name 'Holt' was used to refer to a wood in which only standard trees were grown. Thus, by the start of the nineteenth century Wincobank Hill was well wooded with the ancient monuments well hidden from view, amongst a landscape which consisted of a patchwork of farms and fields little changed from medieval times. The small settlements of Low Wincobank, Brightside and Grimesthorpe were still quite detached from the borough of Sheffield.



Wincobank and the Roman Rigg, 1908

This position, however, was not to last. Following the building of Cyclops Works in Saville Street by Charles Cammell in 1845 there was a scramble for new steel works sites. John Brown built the Atlas Works the following year and Mark Firth followed with the Norfolk Works and Vickers moved into the River Don Works, below Wincobank Hill in 1864. This completed the four mile continuous corridor along the lower Don Valley from which some 80% of Europe's steel was produced during the subsequent twenty years.

The pollution levels from the nearby steel works were having a drastic effect on the vegetation. By 1893 a local writer, S O Addy, described the scene

'The trees, a few small oaks mingled with the mountain ash, are sparse and ill-thriven, and the whole camp, which occupies a commanding position, with a wide prospect on all sides, is well exposed to view.'

In addition, the opening of the new Grimesthorpe colliery at the western end of the base of the hill off Owler Lane, made a further impact on the landscape, as described in a newspaper report of the time.

'The new colliery trade of this district has been further extended by the opening out of a new colliery at Grimesthorpe. The coal crops out on the side of Wincobank Hill, on the Sheffield side, and men are now busily engaged in the driving of gate roads. The coal is of the Silkstone seam, and is of considerable thickness. Engines, screens, shoots and other necessary machinery has been put down, and the work of winning coal will soon be commenced.'

The wood itself was up until this time still managed as a coppice with standards and indeed some of the timber was sold to Grimesthorpe Colliery for pit props. The last recorded sale of wood was in 1901

when 30 oak poles and 30 hedge stakes were sold. Thus ended the formal management of the woods, and in 1904, 48 acres of it was presented to the people of Sheffield by the Duke of Norfolk for use as a park and it was consequently enclosed with railings.

Coppiced oak on Wincobank Hill; summer and winter.

Building works, however, continued to encroach on Wincobank Hill. After the First World War there was a serious housing shortage and an extraordinary 'shanty town' of temporary huts was built on the slopes between Tyler Street and the Roman Ridge to house Belgium refugees and homeless Sheffield families. In 1923 the Wincobank Hall estate was acquired for development for £2000 and 47 houses were built, the first of the 'Flower Estate'. It is said that the slopes of Wincobank were used to test the prototypes of the early tanks produced by the nearby Vickers factory.

It was during this period, when in the late 1920s and 1930s there was a great deal of unemployment and hardship, that the activities of the local people in illegally chopping down and coppicing the oak trees for firewood was to create the distinctive character of the woodland as we see it today, with the many-stemmed, twisted and stunted oaks, all virtually of the same age.

The Second World War brought further developments for and anti aircraft searchlight and gun emplacement was built near to the fort itself and the causeway built to give access to heavy machinery. The heavy concrete foundations of the emplacement can still be seen.

By 1948 the wood was in a sorry state as this report by the City Engineers indicates-

'The 48 acres known as Wincobank Wood is very poor in appearance. It is windswept, and for the most part devoid of vegetation. There is an ugly tip of some two acres in the south western corner. The north western boundary is substantially fenced with wrought iron. The most satisfactory portion, some 15 acres in the north eastern corner is worthy of further attention and another attempt should be made at afforestation.'

Urgent attention was required but the task of regenerating the space was daunting. Added to the other pressures licences had been granted to two local companies, Chapmans and James Childs, to use open spaces on the eastern side as large open tips, despite the fact that there was a clamour for open recreation space.

The position began to improve with the In the late 1970s with the levelling and grassing of the tips to create the recreation fields, clearance of rubbish and creation of new footpaths. Vandalism, fires, illegal dumping and the use of the tracks on the hill for motorcycling, however, continued to make it less than an attractive area to visit.

Throughout the 1990s there was an awakening of interest in the local and national significance and uniqueness of the site and assessments of what the future potential might be. A period of recovery was beginning. The wood became part of the South Yorkshire Forest which began to encourage development initiatives. Tree planting schemes by local schools and the community were coordinated and the Lower Don Valley Development Corporation funded landscaping works. Scrub was removed from the ramparts of the fort and soil replaced on the badly eroded sections.

Within the overall strategic plan of the South Yorkshire Forest Wincobank has been identified as a key area for attention and had been designated as a woodland park. Sheffield's Northern Round Walk passes over the ridge to form part of the green links network. The heritage nature of the woodland has been further recognised by its inclusion as one of the areas of ancient woodland included in the 'Fuelling a Revolution' initiative whereby £1.6 million of lottery funding has been allocated to regenerate these unique and sadly neglected sites.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF WINCOBANK WOOD

Wincobank Wood is now a semi-natural woodland dominated by old oak coppice together with birch and some sycamore and ash. The soils are very impoverished and, as a result of both this and the exposed nature of the site, the oak trees in particular are very slow growing.

Oaks and birches on the top of the hill.

The whole site on the Wincobank Hill is a fascinating mosaic of vegetation and habitats which include scrubland, acid heathland, open grassland and taller herb and plant communities as well as the wood itself. Whilst former planting schemes have added to the interest and diversity there has not always been enough thought given to the appropriateness of the planted species and thus there are a great number of exotic species such as cotoneaster, budelia and camellia on the southern slopes, many of which may be allotment escapees, whilst other native species such as alder and sweet chestnut, have been planted inappropriately on the hilltop. Of even greater concern are the growing patches of Japanese knotweed which infest the north east corner of the site. There is, however, a surprising and

Heather heathland on the steep upper slope.

encouraging range of other native trees which are regenerating well, including goat and crack willow, birch, holly, hawthorn, ash, maple and wild cherry.

Although the woodland could potentially be a valuable reservoir of insects in this heavily built up area, the erosion of the heathland and the very poor ground and shrub layer in the woodland means that the variety is limited at present. Studies in the past have shown that this was not always the case. An observer called A E Hall of Pitsmoor kept records from 1885 to 1893 of the butterflies and moths and these show that there was a wide variety present, with some which were rarities in Yorkshire.

An ecological study carried out by the Ian Rotherham of the Ecology Unit in 1989 confirmed the importance of the site for butterflies and moths. He recorded a number of the commoner species of birds of woodland and grassland but concluded that the fauna was much restricted due to the exposure, eroded acidic soils and the high levels of air pollution. A walk through the wood on a sunny day is surprisingly quiet. There is very little birdsong, even in mid May. An occasional robin or great tit can be spotted in the branches and numerous blackbirds scatter the leaf litter but there is a poor representation of the typical migrant species.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, despite the human pressures on the site, it has continued to slowly recover. A report commissioned in 1996 concluded-

'A well balanced management plan will be difficult and perhaps frustrating to carry out due to access and social problems. It is vitally important to engage the support and cooperation of the surrounding community so that the balance is achieved between ecology, amenity and archaeological value of the site.'

The designation of the site as a **Site of Special Scientific Interest** should focus attention on its unique features and help to protect them.

MANAGEMENT OF WINCOBANK WOOD

Under the *Fuelling a Revolution* programme, woodland restoration and access improvement work is taking place to restore Wincobank Wood to its former glory and to maximise its potential as a recreational and educational resource. The dominance of oak, birch and ash and other native tree species will be re-established in selected areas by thinning, coppicing and planting, and this will also have the effect of creating a more diverse woodland structure. Sycamore, a non-native and highly invasive species, will be particularly favoured for removal. As well as this woodland restoration work, the habitat value of open areas will be improved and the Wincobank hill fort, a Scheduled Ancient Monument, will be protected.

Some footpath improvement work has taken place at the site in the past but much more work is required. This will include

the construction of a length of new gritstone path, as well as of a further pathway suitable for use by people of all abilities.

The boundaries of the site are currently ill-defined and will be restored through the construction of post and rail fencing, in order both to reinforce the historic boundary of the woodland and to prevent access by motorcycles and four-wheel drive vehicles, which have caused a considerable amount of soil erosion.

Signs of neglect such as litter and tipping will be removed and controlled, and steps will be taken to prevent fires.

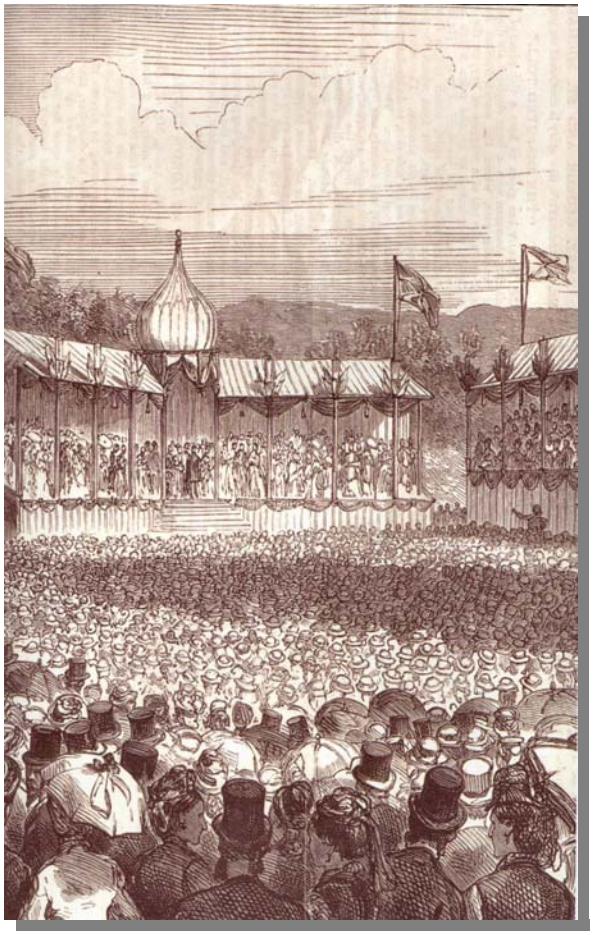
Finally, the potential of the area as an educational and recreational resource will be developed through guided walks, events relating to the natural history and historic interest of the site, children's events and practical management tasks.

The eastern side of Sheffield is surprisingly well wooded. This is the view from Roe Wood towards Wincobank Hill.

HINDE COMMON & BRUSHES WOOD

Hinde Common Wood forms an attractive backdrop to Firth Park

Although only a short walk from Wincobank, Hinde Common Wood could not be more different in character. This is a healthy broadleaved wood with a wide variety of tree species of different ages. There is an attractive and rich shrub and ground flora. As part of Firth Park the wood is valued and well used by the local community.



HISTORY OF HINDE COMMON

Formerly known as **'The Brushes',** the woodland is first described in a document of 1637. From this evidence and from its location on a steep slope, Hinde Common Wood is believed to be an ancient woodland, in other words, one that is at least 400 years old.

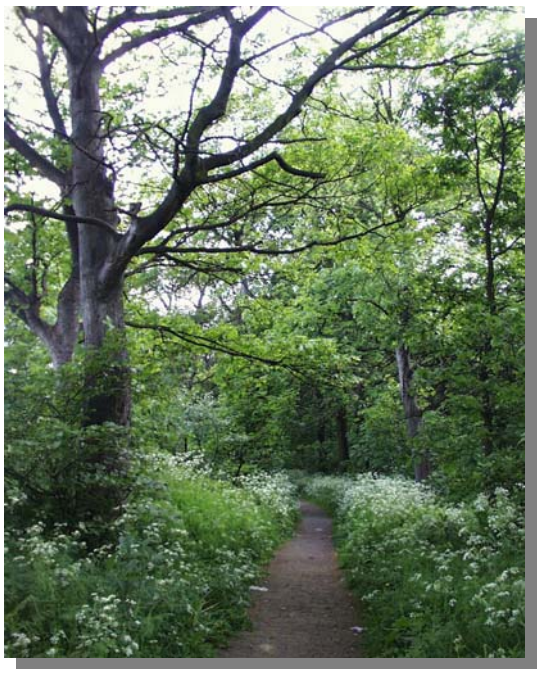
In 1875 the area adjoining the woodland achieved the distinction of becoming Sheffield's first public park when it was donated to the city by the industrialist Mark Firth who was living at the Page Hall, a house, now demolished, which stood in the lower part of the grounds of the present park, as shown on Fairbank's map on page 5. He was shortly to move to Oakbrook, a far grander house at Ranmoor. It was not until 1909, however, that the area of woodland was taken into public ownership and became part of Firth Park. The opening ceremony which took place on August 16th 1875 was an extremely grand affair, attended by Edward, Prince of Wales and his wife, Alexandra, the first Royal visitors to Sheffield since Mary Queen of Scots! The grandees were seated in a fantastic pavilion, shaped, for some reason, to resemble a Turkish

minaret. On the field in front of them 15,000 school children were assembled to sing the National Anthem.

The park itself was still some way beyond the built up area of the town. The main entrance was at this time beside the Clock Tower and this was as far as Firth Park Road extended. Here were refreshment rooms, the park keeper's house and an ornamental lake with ducks and swans. For the next hundred years the park was a busy and popular, with concerts at the bandstand and huge crowds turning out for the Whit Sings on Whit Mondays.

After the 1970s, however, the park's maintenance was scaled down and it entered a period of decline and neglect. Since 2000, when a group called the 'Friends of Firth Park' was created, plans have been advancing to regenerate the park. Most exiting of all is the building at the north entrance to the park of a new modern community building to house the Shiregreen Children's Centre. Within this masterplan for the park's regeneration are the plans to upgrade the woodland which had received little management for many years.

Funding has been secured to build a new Round Walk, part of which will focus on a series of mosaics and sculptures such as the 'Old Man of the Woods' by Jason Thomson and the mosaic of local landmarks by children from a local school.



Further details of the plans can be viewed on the website of the 'Friends' at www.firthpark.org.uk

THE WOODLAND

The woodland on the site is semi-natural and broadleaved. It is dominated by oak and sycamore and also has a significant number of beech and a few ash. The trees vary in age from young saplings to mature trees. In the northern part of the wood, there is a considerable amount of oak regeneration along with some re-growth of elm and elder. This mix