Wath and Boyd Royd Woods, Swinton, Rotherham.

Wath Wood and Boyd Royd form two parts of a single woodland block of about 16 hectares. They lie to the south of Wath and to the west of Swinton, just over 6 kilometres north of the centre of Rotherham. The woodland is situated on the summit and slopes of a low hill which overlooks the Wentworth area. It represents a very prominent landscape feature. Wath and Boyd Royd Woods have a very high archaeological, ecological and landscape value.

The eastern woodland edge of Wath Wood

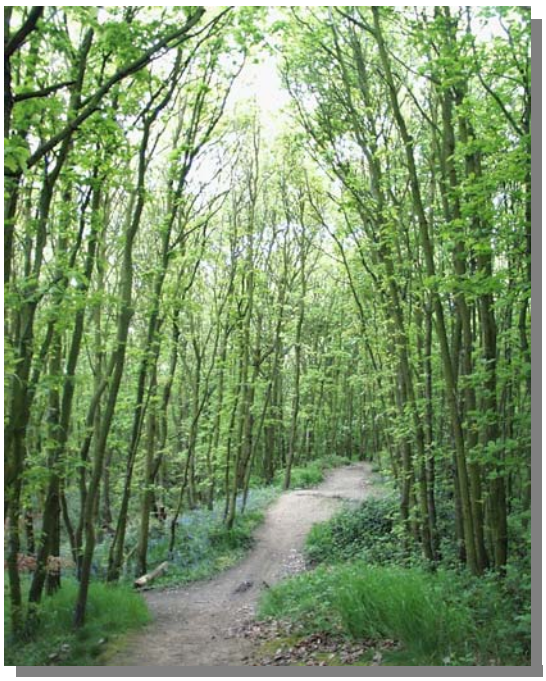
ARCHAEOLOGY

The site contains several features of archaeological value, most notably a well-preserved section of the **'Roman Ridge'**, built between 450 and 600 AD. Despite its name the feature was not Roman in origin but was most probably built in order to defend the Celtic kingdom of Elmet from the advancing Anglo-Saxons. The bank and ditch still form a significant landscape feature within the wood.

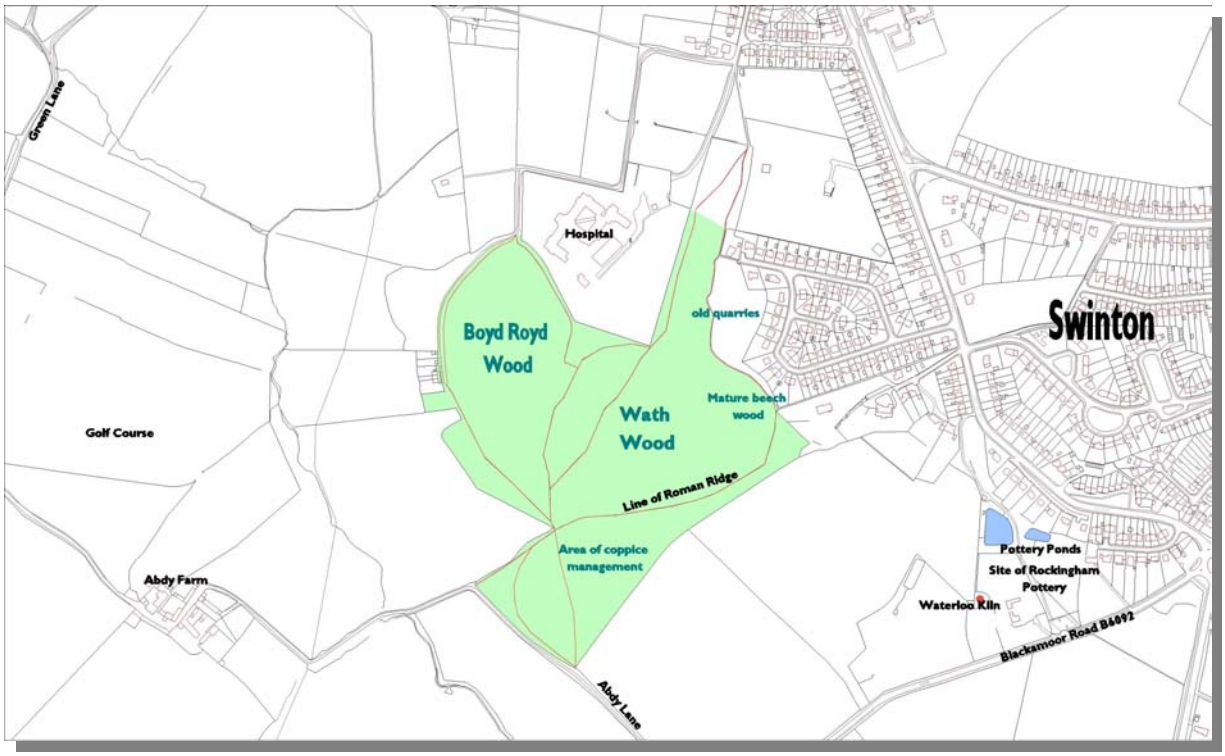
The feature has also been known in the past as the 'Roman Rigg' and represents a local example of such well known linear earthworks as Offa's Dyke on the Welsh border and Dane's Dyke in east Yorkshire.

The Rigg is about sixteen miles long and originally extended from Bridgehouses beside the Don in Sheffield in a north easterly direction towards Mexbrough at the confluence of the Don and Dearne. Although the Rigg was essentially a defensive work it may well have also acted as a trackway between the Celtic hillforts of Wincobank, Roe Wood and Scholes Coppice. To the west of Rotherham, at Kimberworth, the Rigg divides into parallel two arms, a few hundred metres apart.

The Rigg consists of a **mound** on its north side which at its highest is now less than two metres high, dropping down three



The footpath through Wath Wood runs along the top of the Roman Rigg, causing considerable erosion to the ancient monument. Here the trees are closely spaced and even aged.



Map to show Location and Extent of Wath and Boyd Royd Woods, Swinton, Rotherham.

Aerial view of same area as Map above.

metres into the waterfilled **vallum** on the south side. The two sections of the Roman Rigg which pass through Wath Wood to the north and near Birch Wood to the south are probably the best preserved sections of all. The well preserved section of mound and vallum through Wath Wood is followed by the Swinton/Wath parish boundary.

The monument is presently covered by young trees and, given that this was a parish boundary, it seems likely that this has always been the case. The use of the ridge itself as a footpath represents the greatest danger in terms of erosion and one of the aims of future management will be to discourage this and encourage other nearby routes.

Boyd Royd Wood is surrounded by a substantial **woodland boundary bank**, and a **post-medieval well**, known and 'Holywell' has been found in Wath Wood.

HISTORY OF THE WOODLAND

More than any other local wood, Wath and Boyd Royd Woods show striking differences of structure within the one area. Boyd Royd Wood is thought to be an area of ancient woodland and, although little of its detailed history is known, it was probably once managed as coppice-with-standards. Wath Wood became an established woodland only in the nineteenth century on former common land, a remnant of Swinton Common, which had been enclosed. The woodland is now largely dominated to the north and west by mature oak and beech, which shows a good, open woodland structure.

The southern and central part of the woodland, which was clear-felled in the 1970s, is now dominated by dense young birch and oak. These are evenly aged, straight and tall and cast a particularly heavy shade under which little other plant life thrives. Here and there old spreading oak trees survive which may well be older than 200 years and predate the enclosure of the area.

The acid soils, together with the heavy shade cast by the planted beeches, have resulted in most parts of the site having an impoverished ground flora generally, though the woods are rich in their variety of fungi.

Mature beech trees dominate the north end of Wath Wood

Some tree thinning has already taken place in the areas of mature beech and oak in order to encourage natural regeneration of native trees such as oak, birch and hazel. A regular cycle of coppicing has been introduced in the area of dense young birch and oak on the southern edge of the site and this has provided open space and a scrub like habitat, in contrast to the mature woodland on the rest of the site. These newly-coppiced areas within the wood have a much lighter and more vibrant nature.

They give a really good impression of how quickly plant life regenerates when the woodland canopy is removed. It shows how a newly coppiced area of woodland would have looked a hundred years ago. Under the *Fuelling a Revolution* programme, similar woodland restoration work will continue with the aim of further improving the structure of the woodland and its potential for wildlife.

WILDLIFE

The animals are which live in these woodlands are of particular interest. There are a number of nationally scarce invertebrate species and the bird population includes a typical selection of local woodland species including treecreeper, nuthatch, great-spotted woodpecker, little owl and tawny owl as well as more unusual species such as sparrowhawk and nightingale.

Pieces of fallen deadwood provide essential habitats for invertebrates and fungi

In addition the woods provide important habitats for a number of bat roosts.

ACCESS

Situated on the urban fringe and being the only publicly owned woodland in the immediate vicinity, the site is a popular place for recreation. It is crossed by number of footpaths, including at least one Public Right of Way.

Little ground flora can flourish under the thick beech canopy at the top of the wood

MANAGEMENT

Under the *Fuelling a Revolution* project a five year programme of woodland management has been undertaken with the aim of increasing the attraction of the woodlands as a public amenity and as a haven for wildlife.

The Scheduled Ancient Monument of the 'Roman Ridge' will be protected, at least in part by diverting existing footpaths away from this.

Other access work is taking place to maximise the potential of the site as a recreational and educational resource and, to supplement this, a programme of guided walks, events relating to the natural history and historic interest of the site, children's events and practical management tasks is being run. Mountain biking, which is leading to the serious erosion of some paths, will be discouraged by closing a number of access points to bikes. The boundaries of

the wood are to be restored with the replanting of a new 360 metre hedge.

Badly eroded paths will be relaid with crushed stone and steps cut in some steep slippery sections. In addition a completely new section of 1000 metres of footpath is being constructed to allow people of all abilities to enjoy the wood.

Management of the woods is also vital to create spaces through the canopy through which light can enter the wood, releasing the potential for regeneration.

Boyd Royd Wood was thinned in the early 1980s and this has resulted in a pleasant healthy structure which will be maintained by continually removing small groups of mature trees to create spaces.

The management work which is likely to cause most visual impact is the felling of some of the very large beech trees in the northern part of Wath Wood to let some much needed light into this area. In order to reduce this impact to a minimum it is proposed to leave the woodland edge and to cut only small areas at a time. This work has already begun and the advantages are already beginning to show.

A Demonstration of an Ancient Woodland Technique.

In 1994 a five year management plan was developed for the site by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. The plan proposed to maintain young open woodland habitat by introducing a regime of **coppice with standards** into the southern end of Wath Wood. By March 1999 five **coupes** (areas of wood) of a quarter hectare each had been cut and some of the timber felled had been converted into charcoal. The cutting of the coupes was carried out at different times and it is noticeable that the regrowth throughout the area is at different stages of development.

Oak coppice like this is generally on a thirty year rotation and to provide an economic return from the woodland there should be between 600 and 800 coppice stools per hectare. Besides poles for general fencing and agricultural use, other products include fuel wood, tan bark and charcoal.

Areas of the wood which were coppiced only five years ago now show a rich variety of plant growth with improved habitats for insects and birds.

Some standards, tree left to grow on, are left when the rest of the coppice is cut. At each successive cut a few more standards are left whilst some of the oldest standards are felled. This leads to a mixed age structure with trees of many ages and sizes being grown, with numbers ranging from 50 per hectare of the youngest standards to only 7 of the largest trees which are mature and nearing the final felling.

Chiffchaff, one of the birds whose distinctive call you are sure to hear in the wood in May.

THE REMAINS OF A ONCE FAMOUS POTTERY

Whilst the local area is not generally associated with the production of pottery there has, in fact, been a very long tradition of pottery production in the South Yorkshire region. From prehistoric days local clays have been used to produce pots for storage, cooking, eating and drinking.

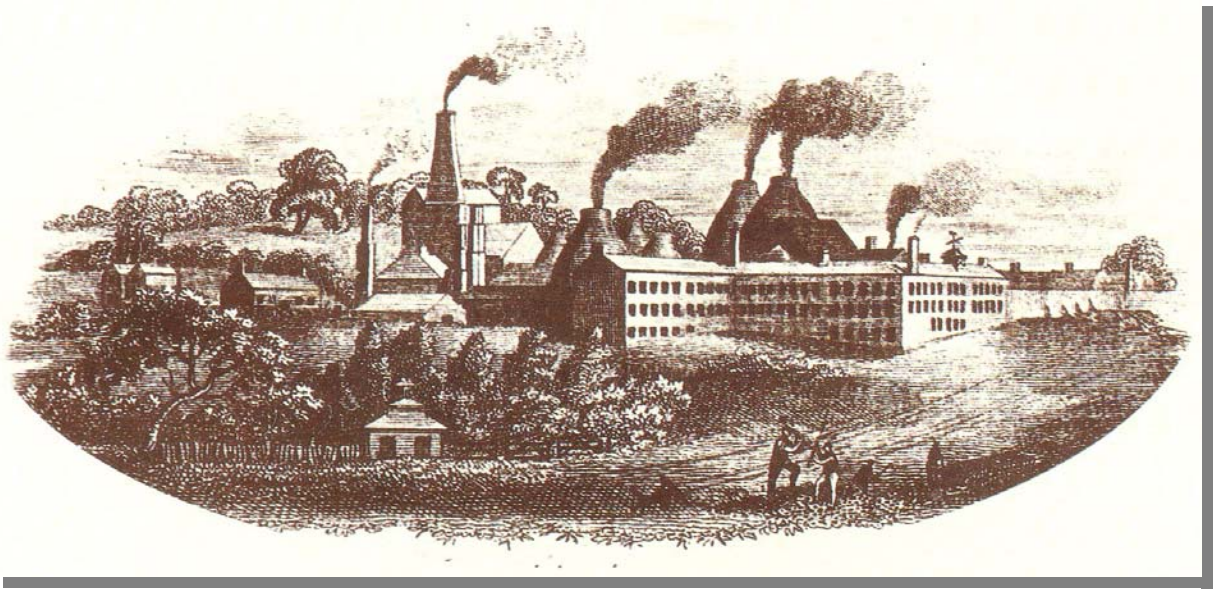
The Romans' who arrived in the area in about AD 54, continued this tradition, for evidence of pot production was discovered during the excavations of the Templeborough Fort between Sheffield and Rotherham. Doncaster was known to be a centre of Roman pottery manufacture.

There is archaeological evidence to show that pottery was being produced around Doncaster in the 11th century and there were potteries at Rawmarsh and Conisbrough in the 14th century.

Until the middle of the 18th century pottery was produced to serve a very local market. The growth of population and the development of canals now enabled potteries to reach a nation wide market and, at the same time as such famous potteries as Worcester, Derby, Chelsea and Wedgewood were being established, a number of potteries were established in South Yorkshire.

At Swinton the raw materials were readily available. There was coal in Wath Wood and on Swinton Common and yellow, white and red clays were found locally. Joseph Flint rented the pottery from the 1st Marquis of Rockingham, the landowner, in the 1740s and began producing tiles, bricks and pottery from local clay.

The pottery changed hands a number of times during the late 18th century and close links were established with the successful Leeds pottery. By 1806, however, production had nearly ceased and the manager, John Brameld, applied to Earl Fitzwilliam for funding to buy hiself out of the partnership and take over sole running of the pottery. The 2nd Earl Fitzwilliam had inherited the estates in 1782 and he provided £2000 with which Brameld and his four sons were able to restore the pottery and begin to develop the incredible range of products which made it famous.



Print showing the extent of the Rockingham Pottery in 1827

In fact, it was the Earl's own estate at Wentworth Woodhouse which provided the initial market for the fine porcelain and earthenware produced here and important visitors, including George IV were suitably impressed and sent their own commissions for dinner services and teapots.

It can be seen from the print of the Swinton Pottery in 1827 that this was now a major industrial undertaking, employing hundreds of men, women and children. There were fine artists and modellers, printers and flint millers. Health and safety was rudimentary and industrial diseases caused by flint dust and the lead in the glazes were all too common.

Whilst the products were a technical success the pottery continued to have financial difficulties and went bankrupt in 1825. Earl Fitzwilliam once again stepped in and the works were renamed the Rockingham Pottery.

The mark adopted by the factory from 1825 included the griffin crest from the Fitzwilliam coat of arms.

It was now that they produced their most fantastic wares, including the famous dessert service commissioned for his coronation be William IV in 1837. The price was £5000 but even so the pottery lost money on the transaction. Trading conditions worsened and the pottery continued to make heavy losses, and by 1841 the pottery was in such debt that it was forced to close.

The site became abandoned and today all that remains of this remarkable local enterprise is the 'Waterloo' kiln, (above) the brick casing of a bottle oven in which a kiln would have stood. It's survival is partly due to its having been used as a smallpox isolation hospital in the early 20th century. The pottery ponds can still be seen, with one of the gatehouse cottages and a small part of the printing room block nearby.

The most enduring legacy of the pottery, however, is the surviving collection of fine painted porcelain which can be seen in various local museums, my favourite being the remarkable 'Rhinoceros' vase in Sheffield City Museum.