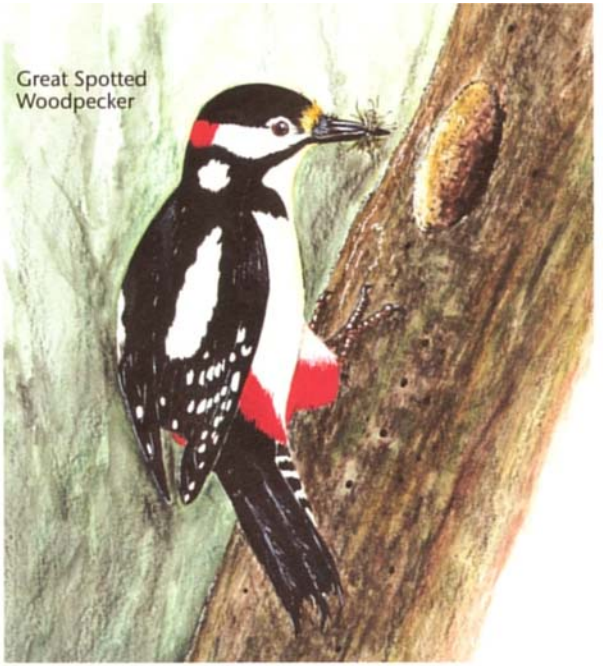
BOWDEN HOUSTEADS WOOD

One of Sheffield's earliest recorded ancient woods

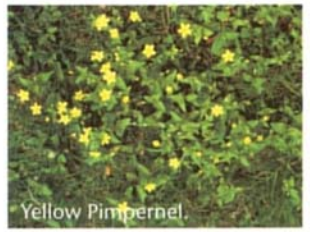
FUELLING A REVOLUTION

The woods that founded the steel country

Sheffield City Council



The most common trees found in Bowden Housteads Wood are the native sessile oak (with its stalked leaves and unstalked acorns), birch and willow (along Car Brook which forms the western boundary of the wood) and planted beech, sweet chestnut and invasive sycamore. Ash, alder, maple and wild cherry are also present in small numbers. The shrub layer of hawthorn, hazel and holly is only poorly developed but there is extensive beech and sweet chestnut regeneration. The ground flora is only patchy but indicators of ancient woodland include bluebell (which is locally abundant) and the more sparingly distributed wood anemone, yellow archangel, yellow pimpernel, greater stitchwort and dog's mercury.



VISITING BOWDEN HOUSTEADS WOOD

Access to the wood is free and unrestricted at all times. As the map opposite shows, there is a well-developed network of footpaths through the wood. The main paths are wide and dry and are suitable for pushchairs. Slopes are mostly gentle. There are bridges over the Sheffield Parkway and Mosborough Parkway.

There are entrances to the wood from the surrounding residential areas (the main ones are shown on the map opposite). There is access to the southern parts of the wood via a bridge over the Parkway. For those coming to the wood by bus, Richmond Park Way, to the east of the wood, is on *First* bus routes X30 and 132.

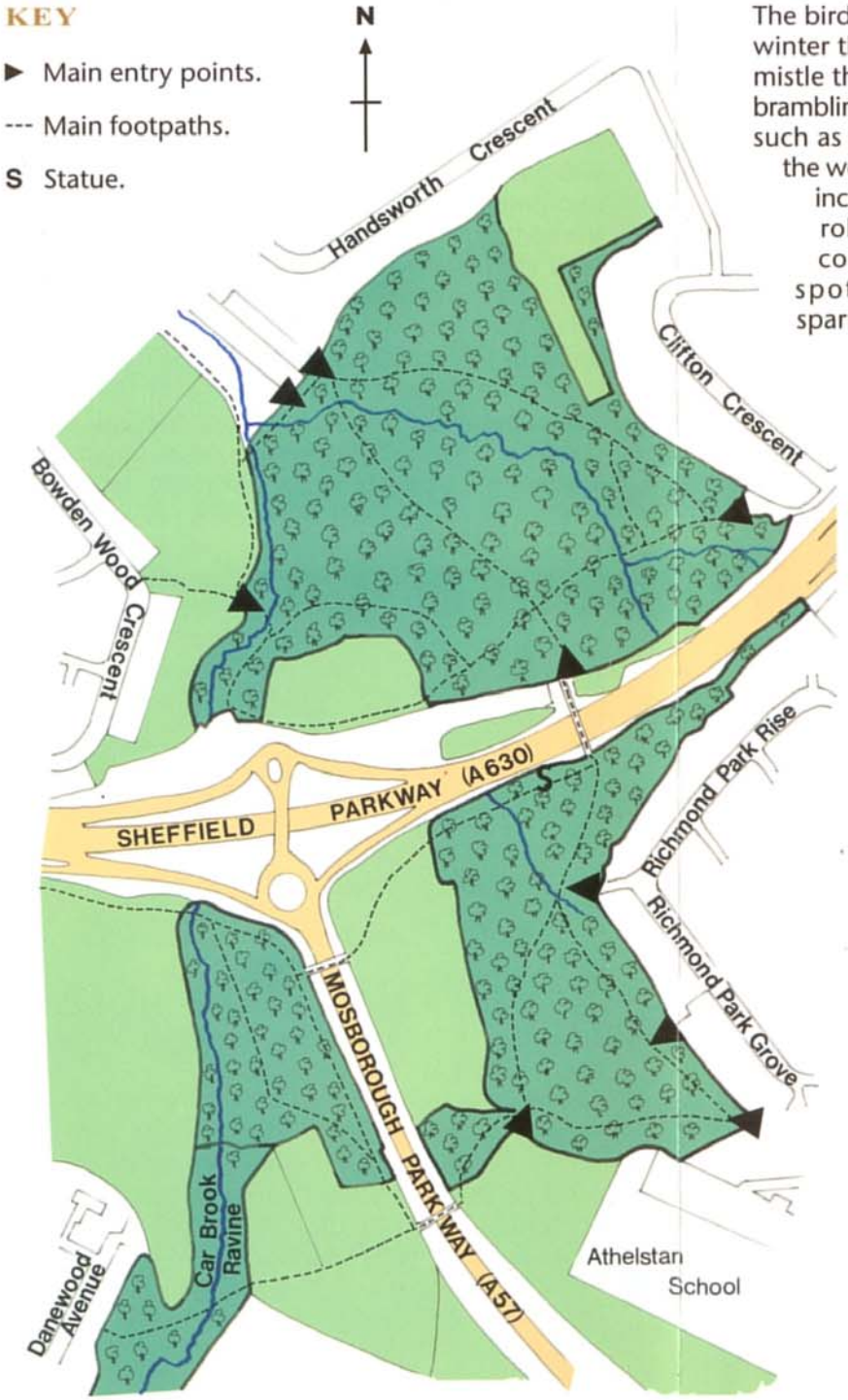

Silver Birch

The wood is a local Nature Reserve and can be enjoyed throughout the year. Late winter is the best time to look at the shapes and barks of trees. In spring and summer woodland flowers are at their best and birdsong is at its height. In autumn and early winter flocks of birds are attracted to the wood to feed on the seeds and the berries.

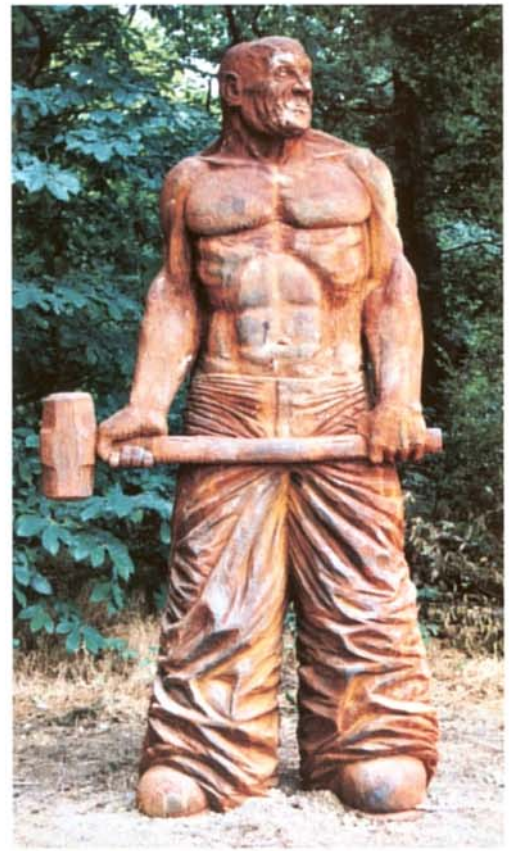
To get the most out of this leaflet, use it together with your choice of natural history identification books when you visit the wood. Birdlife can be even more interesting if you have a pair of binoculars with you.

KEY

- ► Main entry points.
- --- Main footpaths.
- S Statue.



The bird population of the wood is very varied. In winter there are mixed parties of tits and flocks of mistle thrushes, redwings, fieldfares, redpolls and bramblings. In summer the song of migrant warblers such as chiffchaffs and blackcaps can be heard in the wood. Other species likely to be seen or heard include common species such as wood pigeon, robin, wren and hedge sparrow and less common species such as nuthatch, great spotted woodpecker, tawny owl and sparrowhawk.



Jason Thomson's sculpture of a steel giant stands on the edge of Bowden Housteads Wood next to Sheffield Parkway. It explores the close relationship between Sheffield's ancient woods and its steel industries.

BALDWIN'S FARM WOOD

Bowden Housteads Wood was first mentioned in a document in 1332, making it one of the earliest recorded ancient woods in the city of Sheffield. An ancient wood is one that has been in existence since at least AD 1600.

The document in which it was first recorded was an inquisition *post mortem*, i.e., a document that was drawn up in medieval times at an inquest following the death of a large property owner to record the size of his estate and to establish his rightful heir. It was the inquisition of Thomas de Furnival, the lord of the manor of Hallamshire, and the inquest was held in Rotherham in May 1332.

In the inquest document the wood was simply *Baldwynhoustead*. Baldwin is an Anglo-Saxon personal name and Houstead is made up of two Anglo-Saxon elements *hus* meaning house and *stede* which can mean a place, a building or a farm. The wood is therefore probably named after a nearby farm whose tenant was called Baldwin when the name was given.

WOOD PASTURE

In the 1332 inquisition Bowden Housteads Wood was recorded in a list of woods and moorland including Greno Wood and Beeley Wood as a **pasture** and this probably means that it was **wood pasture**.

In a wood pasture besides growing trees to be felled for use in buildings, for converting into charcoal and as the raw material for numerous crafts, the lord of the manor's or his tenants' farm animals were also allowed to graze from time to time. As well as the grass, which was grazed by cattle and horses, acorns were valuable food for pigs during October (this was called *pannage*), new succulent holly would be cut for farmstock (this was called leaf fodder) and bracken would be cut for animal bedding.

As the population grew and the demand for timber trees and underwood increased, wood pastures declined in number, and the former wood pastures were fenced to keep grazing animals out and were converted into coppice woods. This is what happened to Bowden Housteads Wood in the late Middle Ages.

SPRING WOOD

By the end of the sixteenth century Bowden Housteads was a well-established coppice wood. It is included in a long list of woods compiled for the 7th Earl of Shrewsbury who was Earl between 1590 and 1616. The list was entitled '*A briefe estimate of the springe woods belonging to his lordship's forges ...*'

A spring wood was a **coppice-with-standards**. In such a wood most of the trees were cut back to ground level (coppiced) about every 20 years and they then grew back multi-stemmed.


Coppice stool.

Among the coppiced trees some trees were left to grow as single-stemmed trees and these were the **standards**. The standards, which were mostly oaks, were used in building projects.

The fact that the spring woods were said to belong to the Earl's forges suggests that most of the coppice wood would be made into charcoal for smelting iron.

The wood was coppiced regularly for almost the next three hundred years.

Records in the nineteenth century are very full. A map survives from 1810 showing that the wood was divided into five compartments that were felled in different years. In 1838 there are full details of the bark peelers at work in the wood. Oak bark was used to make a liquor in which to soak animal skins to make them pliable for working in a leather tannery. When the contracts were set with the bark peelers the Duke of Norfolk's wood agent paid for 'ale for the bark peelers' to seal the bargain. There then follow details of the 'pilling' and 'shaving' of the bark which was then stacked, chopped, bagged and loaded on to carts to be taken to tanneries.

Loading bark.

Large fellings (called 'falls') were recorded in 1821, 1864 and 1875-77 and these give the tree species being felled: in 1864 oak, ash, elm, willow, alder, maple, crab apple and larch. The mention of larch strongly suggests substantial planting of this exotic conifer had taken place before the mid-nineteenth century. Coppicing was coming to an end. This is confirmed by the fact that the Duke of Norfolk's wood agent in 1898 intended to plant 25 acres in the wood with oak, ash, birch, sycamore, sweet chestnut and lime eight feet apart and 'filled up with larch 4ft apart'. Bowden Housteads was becoming a plantation.

UNDER-MANAGEMENT AND RENEWED ACTIVE MANAGEMENT

That planting did take place about 100 years ago is reflected in the substantial number of sweet chestnut and beech trees in the wood. Sweet chestnut is an introduced species to Britain and beech only occurs naturally in the southern parts of England.

In 1916 the Duke of Norfolk sold the wood to Sheffield Corporation for £6,000 for use as a place of recreation. Since then, not only was it left virtually unmanaged for more than 70 years, but also a large section of the wood was lost through open-cast coal mining in the 1940s. It was also bisected by the construction of the Sheffield Parkway (A630) in 1970 and the southern part of the wood was further sub-divided by the creation of the Mosborough Parkway in 1990. The wood became increasingly even-aged, with a dense canopy and a poorly developed ground flora. Because it was gloomy and monotonous it was much less attractive to insects, mammals and birds, and visitors felt less safe walking there.

The wood saw a marked turn for the better in the 1980s. In 1980 a few experimental glades were created. Then in the winter of 1987-88, following the approval of a management plan, a major programme of thinning and group-felling took place.

This active management of the wood was designed to provide more space for the native trees to develop and to help diversify the woodland by encouraging the regeneration of the shrub layer and the flowering of the ground flora that had been suppressed because of the lack of light reaching the woodland floor. The thinning was irregular, several 30 metre-wide glades were created, and young hazel trees, which would have been a major constituent of the shrub layer when it was managed as a coppice, were planted. Pathways were also improved. Altogether some 350 tons of timber were removed.

The woodland now has a more open aspect in parts. There has been widespread regeneration of trees and shrubs and the ground flora has improved. Sensitive thinning and group-felling has continued as part of the management plan developed for the period 2000-2005.