

# THE ANCIENT WOODS OF THE GLEADLESS VALLEY

**FUELLING A  
REVOLUTION**  
The woods that founded  
the steel country



## ANCIENT WOODS

All nine woods in the Gleadless Valley – Ashes Wood, Buck Wood, Carr Wood, Coneygree Wood, Hang Bank Wood, Herdings Wood, Leeshall Wood, The Lumb and Rollestane Wood – are all examples of what woodland historians call **ancient woods**. This means that they are all likely to have been in existence since at least AD 1600. It was only after that date that people in this country started to plant trees to create woods.

Definite proof that a wood was already in existence in AD 1600 comes from seeing reference to it in a document. Herdings Wood and Rollestane Wood (also known before the nineteenth century as Herdings Wood) were first mentioned as early as 1462. Carr Wood was recorded in a document in 1583 and Buck Wood, under its ancient name of Berrystorth, was described in a survey of the manor of Sheffield in 1637.



The Meers Brook

Surviving ancient woods are often on parish boundaries because our ancestors cleared woodland from the centres of their territories outwards towards the edges. Four of the nine woods (Herdings Wood, Rollestane Wood, Carr Wood and Hang Bank Wood) are on or very close to the Meers Brook, the boundary stream (*meer* means boundary) not only between the ancient parish of Norton to the south and Sheffield and Handsworth to the north, but also between the ancient county of Derbyshire to the south and Yorkshire to the north. The stream also marks the ancient boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia to the south and Northumbria to the north. Buck Wood is also tucked in the corner of Sheffield parish on its boundary with Handsworth.

Ancient woods that have not been cleared are also often found on steep valley sides that would have been difficult to use for settlement or farming in the past. Again this is a feature of the Gleadless Valley woodlands.

## THE MEANING OF THE NAMES OF THE WOODS

The Gleadless Valley and the surrounding area was once very heavily wooded. The Anglo-Saxon place-name element *-ley*, meaning woodland clearing, is very common and is found in Heeley (high clearing), Gleadless itself, which may mean either a clearing with kites (the bird) or a bright clearing, and in Norton Lees and Lees Hall. Herdings also means high riddings or clearings.

Rollestone is a corruption of Rowlinson or Rollinson, a 17<sup>th</sup> century occupier of Herdings Farm, but Rollestane Wood was also known by its old name of Herdings Wood until at least the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Buck Wood was known until the 1880s as Berrystorth, *storth* being the Danish Viking name for a wood, a name that would have been given more than 1,000 years ago.



Hang Bank Wood

The other woodland names tell us about their character. Hang Bank simply means steep slope and a *lum* as in The Lumb was an Anglo-Saxon name for a deep pool, in the bed of a river, presumably in a well-wooded valley. The name Ashes Wood probably refers to the most common tree once growing there; Carr as in Carr Wood is derived from the Viking name for a marshy wood (*kjarr*) and Coneygree means rabbit wood from the Norman word for a rabbit (*coney*) and the Anglo-Saxon name for a small wood (*graefe*).

## PAST MANAGEMENT OF THE GLEADLESS VALLEY WOODS

The first known document referring to one of the surviving Gleadless Valley woods, Herdings Wood (probably referring to the wood now known as Herdings Wood and its bigger neighbour Rollestone Wood), in 1462, gives some important details about its management in the late medieval period showing that it was a coppice-with-standards.

*the xxv<sup>th</sup> day of January in the year of Edward IV  
all the Woode growyng in Herding wood in the  
Pich of Norton to have occupye fell downe  
cole and carry the fald Woode fawng for the  
lond sufficiant Wayvers after the custome of the contre*

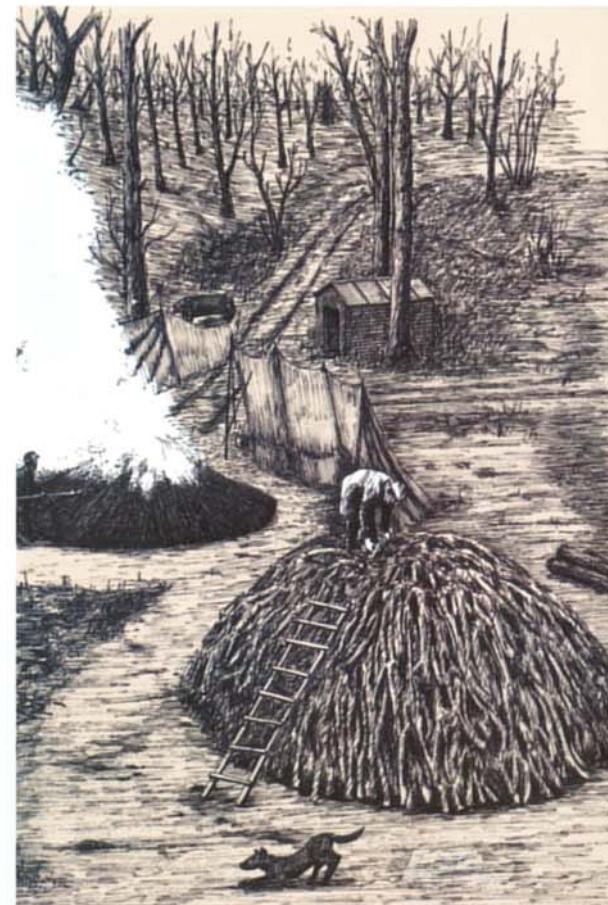
The document states that the two woodmen to whom the wood was let, could fell 'all the Woode growyng' (i.e. the multi-stemmed coppice) and 'cole' it, that is make it into charcoal. It goes on to say that they must leave standing in the wood 'sufficiant Wayvers after the custom of the contre'. This means that the young single-stemmed trees (the 'wayvers') growing in the wood had to be left to grow to maturity. These were the standards that would provide timber for building projects.



Recently felled coppice, with standards remaining standing

Hang Bank Wood and Buck Wood are well recorded as working woods between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1716, for example, Hang Bank Wood was surveyed by the Duke of Norfolk's Woodward and in 1722-23 the coppice wood was sold including the 'ramell', i.e. the small brushwood that was used for heating bread ovens and for protecting water banks at water-powered sites on Sheffield's rivers.

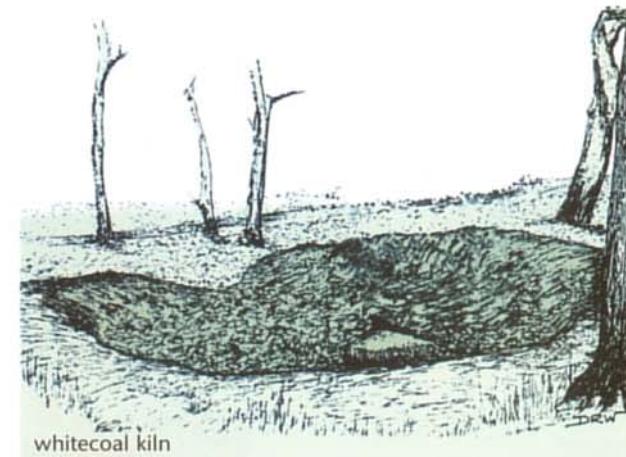
Buck Wood was still being exploited very intensively in the second half of the nineteenth century as a coppice-with-standards. For example, in 1877-78 the coppice and branch wood were sold by the cord for charcoal making and mature standard trees (mainly oak with some ash, elm and beech) and immature trees called poles (mainly oak, ash and birch) were felled and sold to timber merchants.



But even without this documentary evidence of past management there is a ample archaeological evidence surviving in the Gleadless Valley woods that tell us that for centuries they were working coppice woods.

There have survived, for example, many large double-trunked and multiple trunked trees, mainly oak and hazel, that have grown back from coppice stools and felled timber trees, harvested more than a century ago.

There are also the remains of charcoal hearths (levelled areas where charcoal stacks were made), white coal kilns (circular depressions where slivers of coppice wood were heated to drive out all the moisture before being used to smelt lead), and a number of rectangular depressions that are likely to be saw pits where the timber trees were sawn into boards and planks.



whitecoal kiln



## VISITING THE GLEADLESS VALLEY WOODLANDS

Access to the Gleadless Valley woodlands is free and unrestricted at all times. As the map opposite shows, there is a well-developed network of footpaths through the woods but some are steep and muddy in wet weather. There is no special car parking provision for the woods which are entered direct from housing areas, often across areas of rich meadow or cut grass. First bus service 47 runs along Leighton Road and bus service 48 runs along Blackstock Road.

On Leighton Road, at the entrance to Rollestone Wood, artist Karen Gillan, in collaboration with local junior schoolchildren, has created a colourful gateway to the woods.



The best time to see the archaeological features, such as charcoal hearths and whitecoal kilns, is in late autumn, winter and early spring. Autumn is also the best time to look for the varied fungal species that are widespread in the woods growing on the ground and on dead and living wood, such as the Saddle-back fungus shown opposite.

