



Shirtcliff and Smelter Woods



These two areas of ancient woodland are situated in the Shirtcliff Valley between Handsworth and Woodhouse, some 6 Km. south east of Sheffield city centre. These two areas of woodland provide extremely important habitats within the Shirtcliff Valley Local Nature Reserve, which is managed by SWAP, Sheffield Wildlife Action Partnership. Much of the land that makes up the Shirtcliff valley was purchased by Sheffield City Council between 1935 and 1962 and all the areas of woodland are in public ownership.



Both of the woods are classified as being 'ancient' meaning that they are at least 400 years old. They are typical of this type of remnant woodlands in occupying a valley site along the boundary between two parishes. The character of the woods, however, is very different. Shirtcliffe Wood is a very attractive, peaceful and natural feeling wood whilst Smelter Wood unfortunately has the feeling of a piece of neglected wasteland.

The valley consists of a mosaic of different habitats, open farmland, former coal spoil heaps, sloping grassland on sunny banks and gorse scrub on Whinny Bank. The walk along the valley between Smelter and Shirtcliff woods, therefore, has much of interest and the distant views to the east are stunning. On a sunny day in spring the skylarks sing overhead, kestrels hover over the valley side and butterflies flutter above the grassland flowers.

THE SHIRTCLIFF VALLEY

Local place names suggest that this area was once extensively wooded. The name of nearby Woodhouse, for example, is derived from the Saxon 'Wudu' meaning a collection of trees, and 'hus' meaning a house. Stradbroke Road was formerly known as Stubbing Road, a name harking back to the Saxon word 'stub' for a log.

Shirtcliff Wood itself was formerly known as 'Shirecliffe Wood', a name which well describes its site for the name again derives from the Saxon words 'scir' meaning a division, and 'cliff' meaning a steep slope.

In 1756 Shirtcliff Brook was known as 'Shoe Bridge Dike'. Later this name became corrupted to 'Shubbard Dike' and the present unusual name of Schubert Bridge at the eastern edge of Shirtcliff Wood presumably originated in this way.

The Handsworth Enclosure Awards of 1802 show the valley with many parcels of land belonging to different owners. These include the well known Stacye family of Woodhouse who owned the south side of Shirtcliff wood and John Shirt who owned much of the valley to the north and east of Shubert Bridge.

The valley is unique in the Sheffield region in that it appears that the stream has never been harnessed to provide water power for mills. It has not, however, escaped the effects of industry for there is considerable evidence of



coal working. Indeed, in the middle of Shirtcliff wood, beside the bridge, there was a drift mine and the tramway which took the coal up to the road is still clearly visible in the trees. The ground is still uneven around here and the bank of the brook stained orange from the spoil. At the bottom of the valley between the woods there is an area which looks quite natural but which has in the past been open cast for coal.

Further down the valley there are areas beside the stream which are much wetter and here willows have been planted.

SHIRTCLIFF WOOD

Shirtcliff Wood lies in the Shirtcliff valley on the northern edge of Woodhouse, nearly 7 kilometres east of the centre of Sheffield. The Shirtcliff Brook runs at the valley bottom through the wood.

Although the wood first appears on a map dating from as late as 1802, historical documents suggest that it was managed for charcoal in the Middle Ages by the Monks of

Kirkstead Abbey as part of the Bramley Hall Estate.

An uneven-aged semi-natural woodland, Shirtcliff Wood is mainly dominated by oak, ash and sycamore. Other tree and shrub species include elm, alder, willow, holly and hawthorn. The wood has a rich ground flora including thirteen ancient woodland indicators. These include bluebells, wood anemone, ransoms, yellow archangel.

A SPECIAL TREE

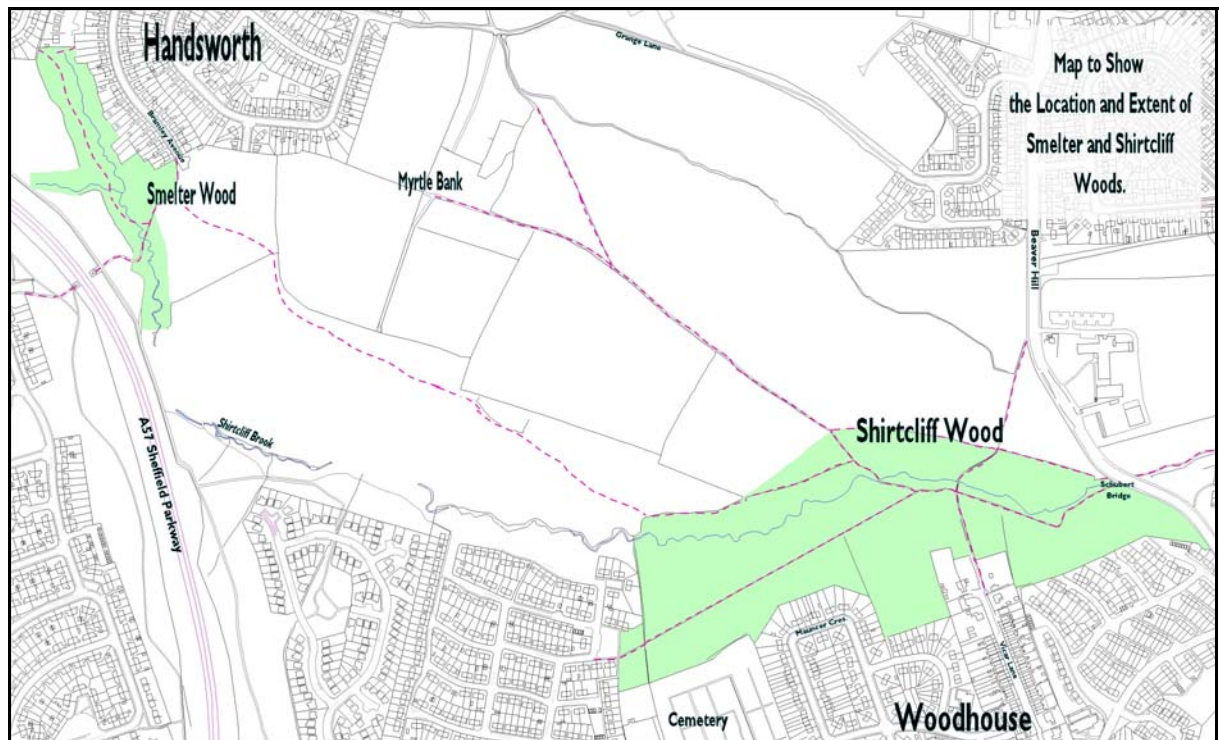
Towering over the road at Shubert Bridge stands a majestic black poplar tree. It is a tree which is extremely rare in the region and this is a particularly fine example. It is thought to be the largest tree in Sheffield.

The shape and form of many of the small, multi-stemmed oak trees in the wood suggest that in the past much of the wood was coppiced and that the oaks had been specially planted.



BIRDS

Because of the rich variety of habitats within and around the wood, Shirtcliff provides much to interest the birdwatcher. Some 36



Map to show the Location and Extent of Shirtcliff and Smelter Woods.
The purple dotted lines indicate footpaths.

species have been identified in the valley including birds typical of farmland like linnets and goldfinches, those which nest in scrubland like yellowhammers and bullfinches and the typical woodland birds including both green and great spotted woodpeckers.

MANAGEMENT WORKS

There have been efforts at various times to improve the amenity value of Shirtcliff Wood. In 1977 some improvements were carried out, rubbish cleared, benches and bridges built and paths cleared. In 1988 an area of arable land at the top of the bank was planted with oak trees and in 1990 there was more work done to improve the footpaths and a boardwalk constructed.

Little management work has been carried out on the woodland itself, however, in living memory. Under the present

management plan which runs from 2003 to 2006, Under the **Fuelling a Revolution** programme, woodland restoration and access improvement work is taking place to restore the wood to its former glory and to maximise its potential as a recreational and educational resource.

Extensive work of thinning and group felling will take place to let light through the thick canopy in order to encourage the right conditions for natural regeneration and therefore rejuvenate the aging woodland. In some places dead wood will be left in order to provide suitable habitats for insects and birds. Sycamore, a non-native and highly invasive species of which there is currently an abundance in the understorey, is being especially favoured for removal. Another non-native and highly invasive species, Japanese knotweed, is present in places and this is also being controlled.



Bird Cherry in full flower in April at the top of Myrtle Bank.

Although the main aim will be to manage the wood for recreation and conservation it is hoped that there will be some timber production in the future and so selective thinning to favour the best shaped trees will be undertaken.

ACCESS

Access to the woodland is good and it is an important recreational resource for those living nearby. In fact there are ten access points into the wood, some of which, however, have been vandalised and widened to allow entry to motorcycles. These are a real challenge to the future development of the wood as motorbikes do considerable damage to the footpaths and wreck the surface for other users.

Access to the wood, although already good, will be further improved by upgrading the path system and creating resting places with seating. Work is also required to reduce problems of litter and fly tipping and vandalism in the form of fires.

A length of drystone wall is to be constructed in order to restore the historic boundaries of the wood and prevent unauthorized access by motorcycles and horses. Finally, the potential of the site as an educational and recreational resource is being developed through guided walks, events relating to the natural history and historic interest of the site, children's events and practical management tasks.

Both green and great spotted woodpeckers can be heard and seen in Shirtcliff Wood.





Map showing Location and Extent of Shirtcliff Wood.



Aerial View of the same area as the map above.

SMELTER WOOD

Smelter Wood is located just over 5 kilometres east of the centre of Sheffield, between the Richmond and Handsworth areas of the city. This small area of woodland occupies the steeply sloping valley sides at the source of the Shirtcliff Brook. The wood provides a useful barrier between the houses to the north and the busy Mosbrough Parkway.

It has many of the unfortunate characteristics of a neglected area of urban woodland; it is litter-strewn, suffers from vandalism and fly-tipping and is crisscrossed by ugly metal pipework. The wood is bounded to the east and west sides by areas of open grassland and so it is the woodland margins which create the richest habitat for wildlife.

In comparison with most of the other heritage woodlands, relatively little is known about the history of Smelter Wood. It is known however that the northern end of the woodland has been significantly affected by building development, whilst the southern end has been lost to road construction. The name of the wood probably derives from the Smelter family who were its owners in the 19th century and not, as might have been expected, from any use of the woodland in supplying the fuel for iron smelting.

There is evidence however, in the form of the twisted shapes of many of the older trees, that coppicing and even pollarding management systems have been in use in the past. Where the wood has been cleared in the past for small scale coal mining operations secondary woodland has regenerated. The major impact of management in the 20th century has been between 1977 and 1983 when a

large number of dead and diseased elms, victims of Dutch Elm Disease, were removed for safety reasons. More recently some thinning to encourage regeneration was carried out along the central part of the wood. This appears to have been successful.

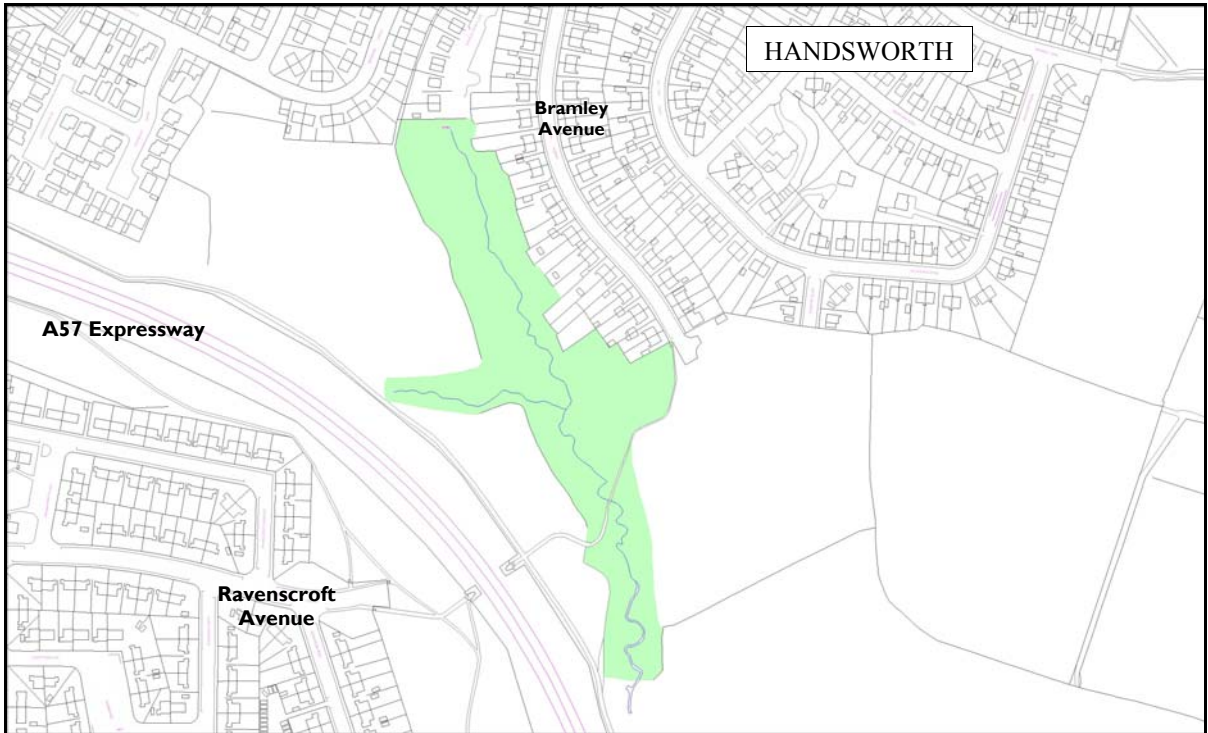
At present there are no interpretive signs in the wood and it is underused as an educational resource. The tarmac footpath that crosses the wood from Bramley Avenue and goes under the Parkway is well used by local people but other paths within the wood are poorly defined and unmaintained.

The wood, which is an ancient semi-natural woodland, is mainly dominated by oak and sycamore. Other trees include elm, field maple and cherry, with shrubs in the understorey including holly, hazel and hawthorn. Despite its neglect there is a rich ground flora with 13 ancient woodland indicators. There is an especially thick cover of celandines which make a glorious show along the steep slopes during April.



Great patches of Celandines grow up the damp slopes.

An interesting area of open grassland can be found in the north of the site, at the edge of which a number of large rowan



Map Showing the Location and Extent of Smelter Wood.



Aerial View showing the same area as the Map above.

trees grow. This variety of habitats makes the whole area an rich one for birdlife. During a visit in April I saw blackcaps as well as the usual variety of common woodland birds.

Under the **Fuelling a Revolution** programme, woodland restoration and access improvement work is taking place to restore Smelter Wood to its former glory and to maximise its potential as a recreational and educational resource. Some thinning, group felling and coppicing will be carried out in order to create a more varied woodland structure and to encourage the regeneration of native species such as oak, ash and hazel. Sycamore, a non-native and highly invasive species, will be particularly favoured for removal. In addition to this woodland management work, the habitat value of the open grassland in the north of the site will be improved.

Access to the wood will be improved by repairing, upgrading and waymarking the path system. Work is also required to reduce problems of litter, fly tipping, vandalism in the form of fires and unauthorized access by cycles, motorcycles and horses. The boundaries of the woodland, which are currently poorly defined, will be reinforced by the construction of post and rail fencing. This will particularly help the woodland along its eastern boundary which has suffered from encroachment through the extension of adjacent gardens.

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



Pipistrelle bat and Tawny Owl—
Nocturnal creatures of the
Shirtcliff Valley

