



# Archaeology



Ecclesall Woods contains a great wealth of archaeological features, from the pre-historic through to the modern period. It has long been recognised as an area rich in surviving archaeological features, some pre-dating the woods and others associated with woodland management.

Two surveys have recently been conducted of the archaeology. During the 1990s Paul Ardron, with help from members of Sheffield Hallam University, carried out walk-over surveys of features while in 1999 the University of Manchester Archaeological Unit undertook a desktop study and brief walk-over survey (Arrowsmith 1999) on behalf of Parks, Woodlands and Countryside.

Following a successful National Lottery "Awards for All" grant to the Friends of Ecclesall Woods in 2000, a consultant archaeologist was contracted to help with interpreting the archaeology to the public and producing a concordance of sites recorded in both surveys for use in management. This study cross referenced features recorded in both surveys, sampled a range of sites for ground-truthing, and provided recommendations for interpretation to the public, further work and general management guidelines.

The surviving archaeological heritage of Ecclesall Woods includes a small number of pre medieval sites and exceptional coverage of medieval to post medieval features mainly associated with woodland management. As such the woods should be considered a regionally important

archaeological landscape, not only because of the number, range and density of features, but also because of the associations between them and the related documentary record.

Archaeological concerns therefore need to be incorporated into management of the woodlands.

The woodland contains **prehistoric rock art**, and stray finds of the Prehistoric and **Romano-British** periods are also reported. Close to the north-west edge of the bird sanctuary, a possible small promontory fort of late pre-historic/Romano-British date is present, associated with a field system and possible settlement. Other probable field systems are present near the Limb Brook.

Earthworks near the Cow Lane entrance appear to define a much larger enclosure, for which a similar date has been sometimes suggested but which is perhaps more likely to be associated with livestock control in the medieval period or later.

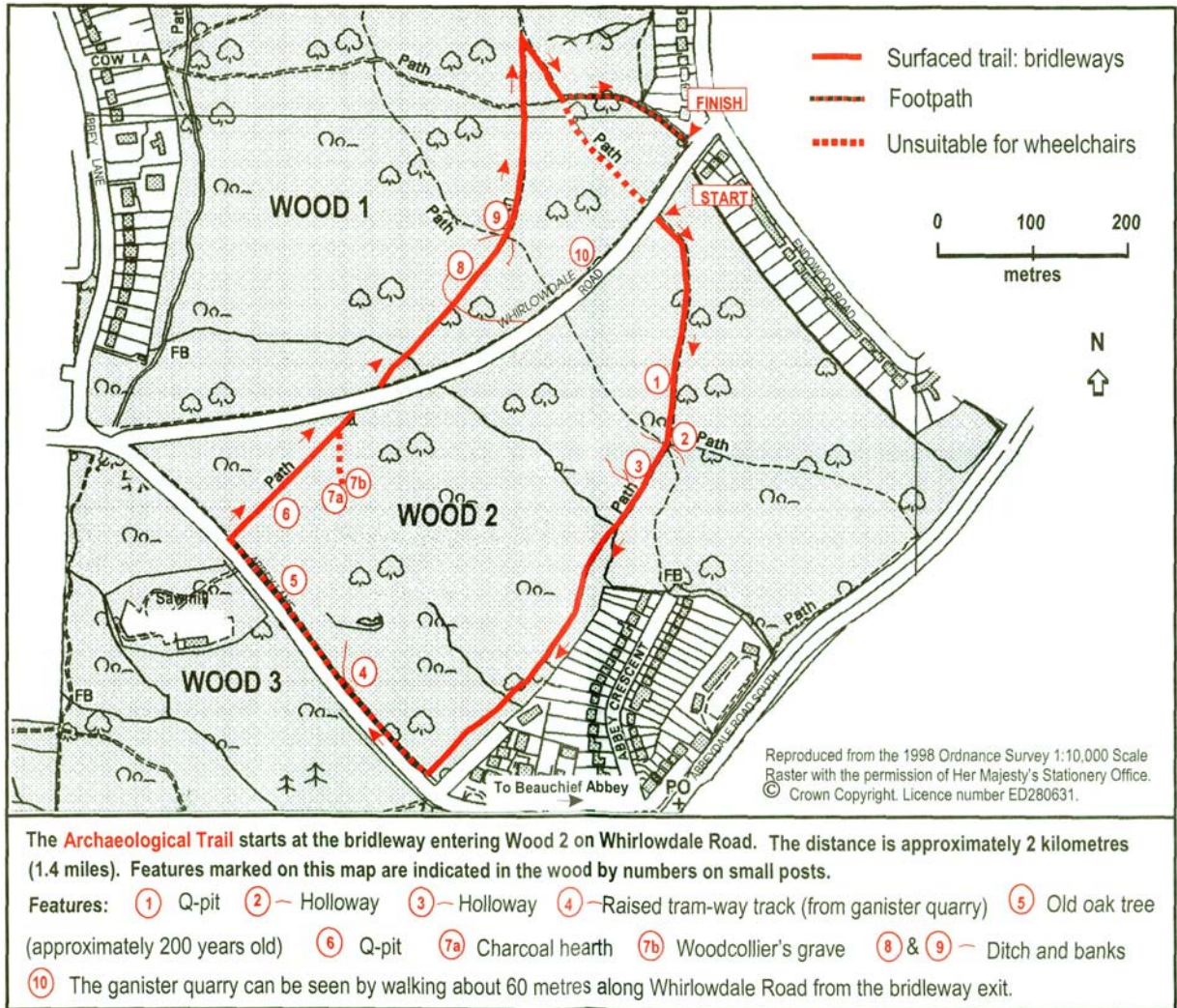
The majority of sites identified are earthworks relating to the **post Medieval production of charcoal and whitecoal** when the site was managed as coppice with-standards. Several hundred **charcoal hearths** have been recorded and are visible in the form of ovoid saucer-shaped depressions averaging 4-8 m in diameter often with slight ring banks.

**Whitecoal pits (or Q-pits)** are generally embanked deeply with flue spouts opening down-slope of the pit.

**Boundary banks, ditches**, canalised streams and around 150 grips are present from the associated compartmentalisation of the woodland.



## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRAIL



Some may be medieval, others, like drainage ditches, may date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There is also extensive evidence for local extractive industries, both **coal mining and stone quarrying**, within the south-west corner of the bird sanctuary for example.

Other features from the post-medieval period include two **mill sites** (Ryecroft Mill and Whirlow Mill) with associated weirs and leats. A linear earthwork, comprising a bank and ditch which can be traced alongside the eastern edge of the Limb Brook may possibly date from an earlier period and be a remnant of the boundary of the medieval deer park of Ecclesall.

### Sites with Statutory Protection

The **prehistoric cup and ring-marked stone** is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (No 29932), and is dated to the late Neolithic or Bronze Age periods (2800-500 BC). It is the first prehistoric carving to be discovered in the eastern foothills of the South Pennines, and is therefore very rare. A 2m boundary around the feature is also protected (English Heritage, 1998).

This earthfast, sandstone, carved boulder was re-discovered in 1981, and its location is not generally publicised to prevent damage and disturbance to the feature.





An extract from the monuments description in the S.M.R. reads-

"The carving on the slightly domed upper surface of the rock consists of three sub-oval, deeply cut rings, each surrounding one to four shallower cups connected by gutters. The central ring with its internal cups has been



emphasised by cutting away the sandstone on three sides to form a raised oval boss. This feature is possibly unique and illustrates that the carving was designed with visual prominence in mind rather than being executed purely as a ceremonial act. Other unusual features of the carving are the gutters near the edge of the slab which surround much of the carving. Internal gutters subdivide the slab into several irregular, enclosure-like, zones. The various elements of the carving are not cut to a consistent depth, frequently shallow features



being intersected by deeper ones. This feature indicates that the carving was not executed as a unitary design but has been modified over time. There are several irregular patches of shallow carving on the slab which may represent attempts to cut away obtrusive features of earlier designs. Elsewhere on the slab they serve to emphasise particular features."

**The stone bridge over the Ryecroft Brook, above, (Wood 3), and a charcoal burner's gravestone dated 1786 (Wood 2), are Grade II Listed Buildings, and as such can be considered of regional importance. There are potentially other sites within the wood of national significance. The hill-top enclosure on the north-western edge of the bird sanctuary, which is**



likely to be **prehistoric or Romano-British** in origin, and the adjacent field system and possible settlement (likely to be pre-medieval) are worthy of consideration for scheduling as ancient monuments.

A probable field system is also present to the east of the Limb Brook, although its date is unclear, but is potentially prehistoric, Romano-British or medieval.

Another boulder with possible rock art has been identified in the bird sanctuary by Ardron (2001). However, it is recommended that this requires further study by a specialist.

A **bank and ditch** traced alongside the Limb Brook, if a remnant of the medieval deer park boundary, could be considered of regional importance. That importance would be greater if this feature was an earlier frontier, and has sometimes been suggested, but this seems less likely.

Other archaeological sites identified within the woods are mostly **Q pits** and **charcoal hearths**, extractive sites or sites associated with **extraction**, and linear earthworks which include **trackways** and possible **woodland compartment boundaries**. In general terms, these sites can be considered of local importance. The significance of individual sites may be increased by matters such as rarity and group value. Rarity would include, for example, Q-pits whose form differs from the norm. Stone-edged trackway in Ran Wood.



The origin and purpose of this trackway is still unclear. It may have been a tramway serving the mills.

## Q Pits and Charcoal Hearths

The most striking remaining evidence of the charcoal burner's activities in Ecclesall Woods is the remarkable gravestone that stands in Wood 2. The carefully inscribed inscription tells much of the tragic story;-

In Memory  
of **GEORGE YARDLEY**  
Woodcollier he was Burnt  
To death in his Cabbin on  
This place Oct 11th 1786  
William Brooks Salesman  
David Glossop Gamekeeper  
Tho. Smith Besomemaker  
Samp. Brookshaw Innkeeper

Clearly Yardley was a charcoal burner who was living in the woods in one of the typical conical huts next to his work. He must have been a well known and liked local character for his friends to spend so much on his tombstone. We can only surmise what happened. Maybe a sudden gusty wind in the night blew sparks from the burning stack onto his crude shelter or possibly he returned to the woods late somewhat the worse for wear after a night in the Rising Sun on Abbey Lane and fell asleep with his clay pipe still alight. Certainly Sampson Brookshaw was the landlord of the Rising Sun at this time. Such tragic eventualities were, it seems, a hazard of the trade. In fact the very last known charcoal burner to work in the Sheffield region, William Ogden, died in similar fashion when he was overcome by the fumes from the burning stack whilst asleep on a burn in Lincolnshire.





The generally accepted view is that these were white coal hearths. White coal was a fuel used for lead smelting, and is thought to have been a sort of dried wood. This would have given a stronger heat than wood alone but not as fierce as charcoal. It is thought that smallish sticks of wood were placed in the pit and covered, possibly with turf, before the fire was built. The mechanics of the process are not understood. Maybe the 'spout' was simply a drain to keep the pit dry.



It has been estimated that there are the sites of over 200 **charcoal hearths** in the woods consisting of circular areas of about 5 metres in diameter, occasionally surrounded by stones, that represent the bases on which the charcoal stacks were burned. They are, however, not easy to make out, especially after the ground vegetation has grown up in spring. It is just possible to identify a hearth that stands near the charcoal burner's grave.

**Q-pits**, however, are a much more easily identified feature, although their use is far more enigmatic. Almost 100 of these pits have been identified in woods 1 and 3 almost invariably on shallow slopes. They consist of a circular pit between 3 and 5 metres in diameter and approximately 60cm. Deep with a 'spout' or depression at the downslope point. The name 'Q-pit' may refer to their shape being like the letter Q or it might simply be short for 'query' since archeologists have been undecided about their origin.

The inscription of Thomas Smith, **besom maker**, is interesting in recalling another significant woodland craft. Besoms were indispensable for sweeping flagged floors and paths. The handles were made from young ash, birch or hazel poles and the brooms from bundles of birch twigs bound with strips of willow or brambles. Skilled besom makers were called 'broom squires.'



## Local Mills

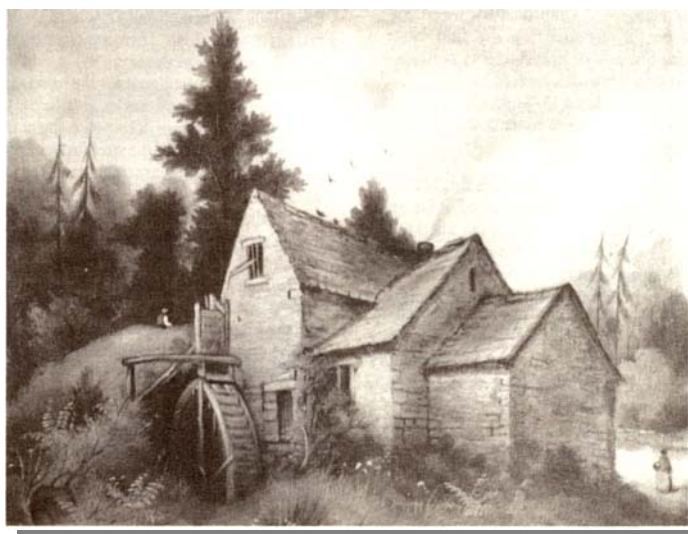
The two known mill sites, **Ryecroft Mill and Whirlow Wheel**, provide examples of the local exploitation of water-power and through their associations with lead smelting and grinding are particularly illustrative of local industries. The surviving remains of the mills themselves and their associated water features can be considered to be of regional importance. At Ryecroft Mill tree-root action may be collapsing parts of the dam.

Within the vicinity of Ecclesall Woods stood at least 4 mills over the centuries. Two of these, the Walk Mill, the site of which was obliterated by the building of Dore and Topley Station in the 1890s, and Abbeydale Works stood on the Sheaf, whilst the Ryecroft and Whirlow Wheels stood within the wood itself on the Limb Brook. The streams turned their wheels to perform an unexpected variety of processes.

**The Walk Mill** was an ancient site, erected in about 1280 by the canons of Beauchief Abbey on land given by Ralf de Ecclesall for 'the erection of a fulling mill.' This would have been used to consolidate the woollen cloth woven from the fleeces of the local sheep kept by the monks. The mill later became a typical cutler's wheel.

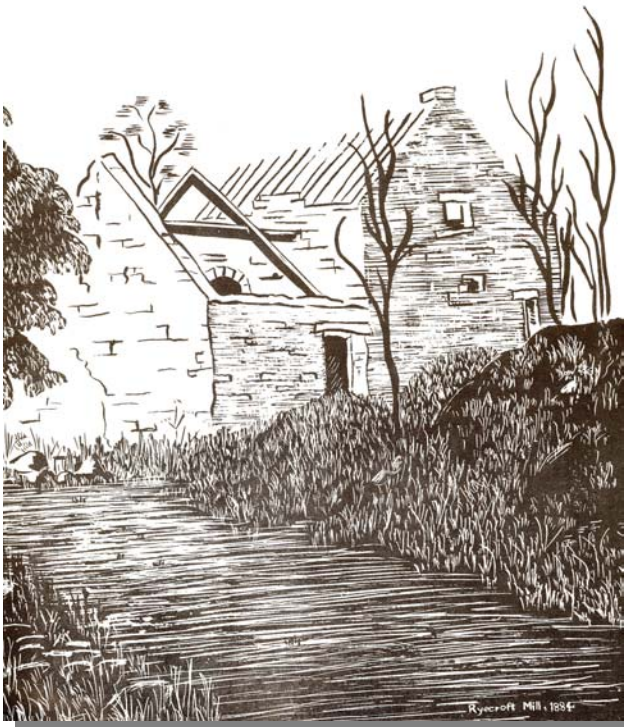
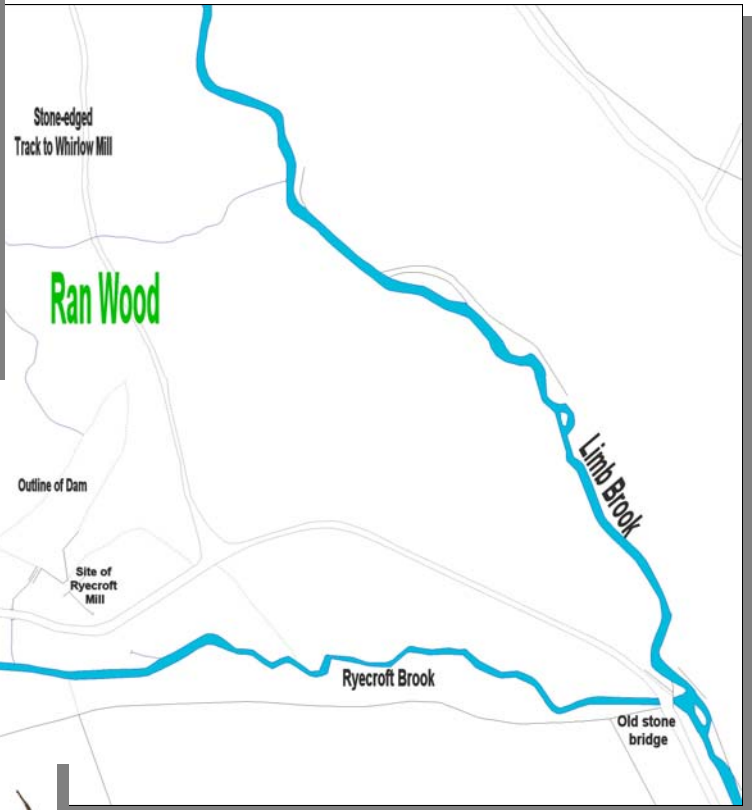
**Abbeydale Works** have been preserved as a museum very much in their 19th century form as a steel works, scythe forge and wheel. The history and running of the works was closely tied to the woodland itself for it was John Bright as the landowner, for whom the original cutlers wheel was built on this site in 1676. No doubt the woods would have provided charcoal for the furnaces, timber for handles and tools and bark for the tanneries to tan the leather for the belts to drive the stones.

The remains of **Ryecroft Mill** can easily be traced beside the path that follows the Limb and Ryecroft Brooks through the woods. The mill was certainly in existence in 1671 when it was referred to in a deed of the Duke of Devonshire who owned the site since this section of the wood to the south of the Limb Brook was in Derbyshire. Its use was closely associated with Derbyshire since, until the mid 19th century, it was used to smelt the lead from the Peak District mines. One of the adjoining fields was called 'Belland', referring to the lead poisoning caused by the noxious fumes. It later became a corn mill known as 'Unwin's Mill' and is shown in two sketches. The first painting is undated and clearly shows the mill, with its high backshot wheel, as it would have appeared from the path. It is interesting to see that tall conifers were already a feature of this section of the wood. The second drawing of 1884 (opposite) shows it disused and ruinous.

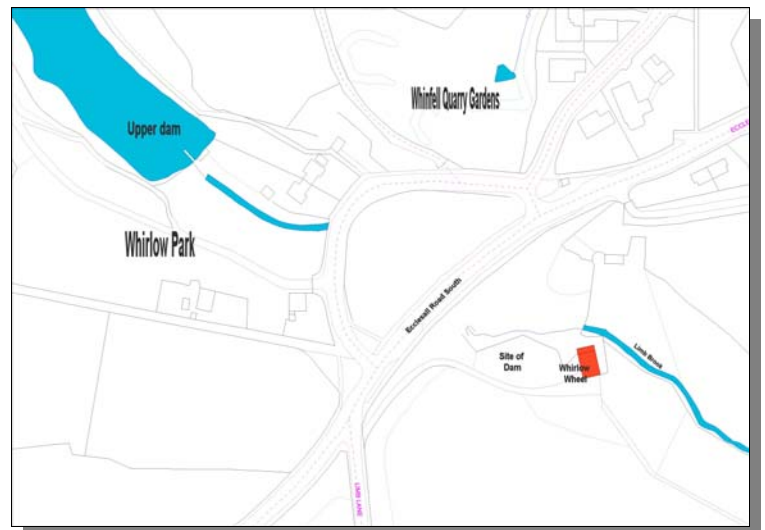


The back wall of the wheel pit (top left) still stands facing the path and the tail goit runs through a tunnel under the path. The bed of the pond is still marshy and the little channel that fed the dam from the Limb Brook can still be traced through the wood.





The **Whirlow Wheel** still stands close to the path below Ecclesall Road South, used as a groundsman's store. The earliest records in 1586 show it as a corn mill belonging to John Bright. In the 19th century it was in use as a grinding wheel and continued working until 1933.



**'The Cellar Lad'** by Theresa Tomlinson (pub. Julia MacRae Books) is an excellent story based on Abbeydale Works and Ecclesall Woods. It graphically illustrates the very close links between the two. The book opens with a scene in Ecclesall Woods in which the lad meets the charcoal burners and features the charcoal burner's grave. It makes an excellent book for class reading.