

Visiting Gillfield Wood

Access to the wood is free and unrestricted at all times. The wood has one main footpath along its length from behind Aldam Road in Totley to the bus terminus on the Baslow Road. It is crossed by three other footpaths – to the North leading to Totley Hall Lane and old Totley village; to the south to the Holmesfield settlements of Woodthorpe Hall, Fanshawe Gate Hall and the farmstead of Storth House.

The Friends of Gillfield Wood

Most of this leaflet's content comes from research and surveys carried out by The Friends of Gillfield Wood with the help of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and training from South Yorkshire Biodiversity Research Group.

Written by Sally Goldsmith and Chris Measures; drawings and watercolours by Bob Warburton; photographs by Sally Goldsmith, Chris Measures, additional bird photographs by Martin B Withers FRPS; photograph of besom maker by kind permission of Ian Rotherham and aerial photograph of wood by kind permission of Mel Jones.

Felling and replanting

The Totley side of the wood was clear felled in 1943 by Batty Langley, timber merchants. Ralph Barnes remembers being one of five men employed in the felling of oak, sycamore and beech. Another local woman, Jean Smithson says "huge tripods were erected, I think for lifting timber. The trees were felled and the plant life crushed. All was mud and devastation." Local ramblers' leader GHB Ward reported that after the timber had been removed, the original old stone entrance at the west end was abandoned and the footpath relocated to its present position. The wood was bought by Sheffield City Council after this felling and replanted in the 1960s, mainly with American oak and larch.

The wood today

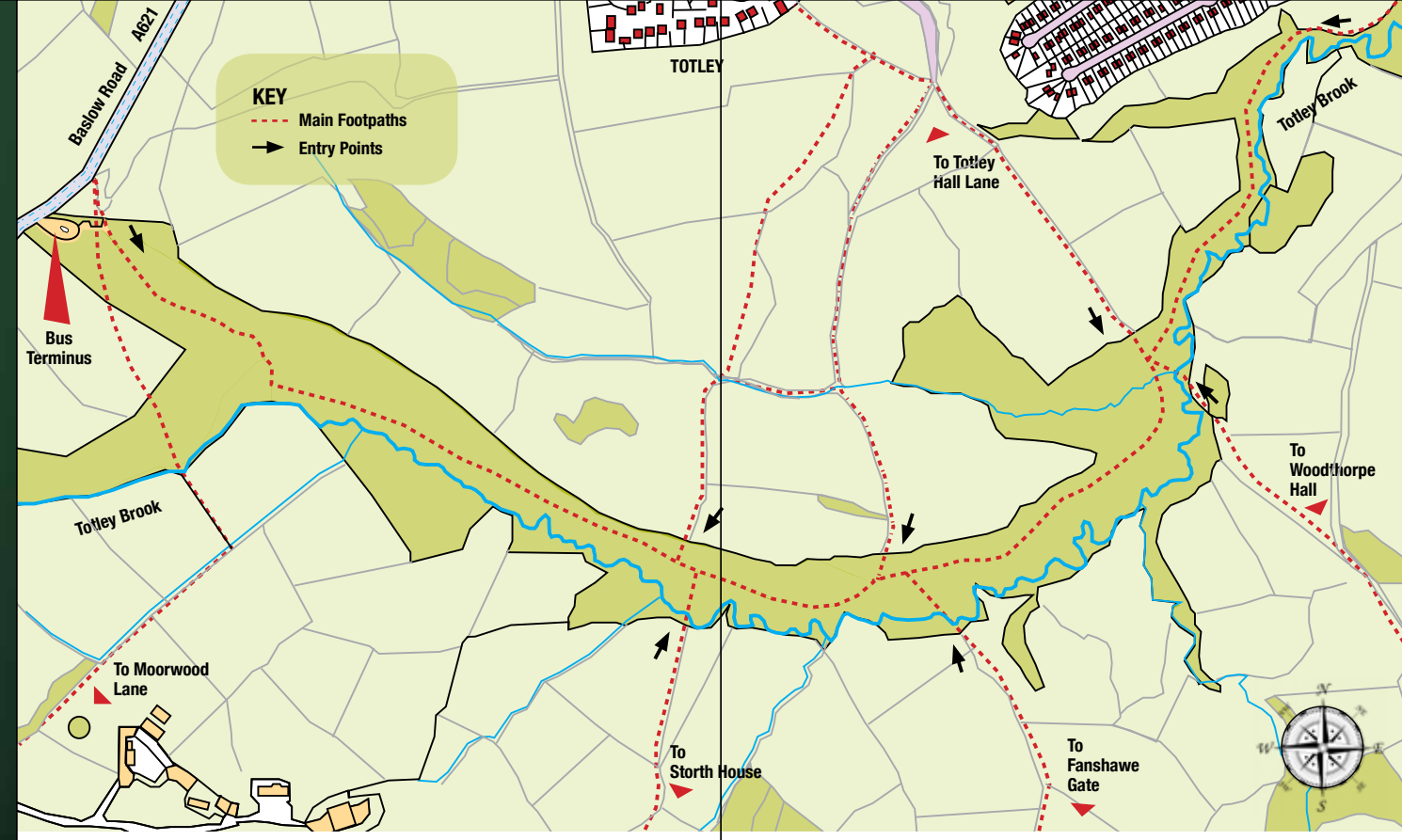
After replanting, the wood had little management. However, in 2011 a new group formed, The Friends of Gillfield Wood, aiming to work together with Sheffield City Council to conserve, improve and learn about the wood. Since then, trees have been thinned, footpath, stile and drainage work carried out and walls repaired. There have been flora and fauna surveys and, with the support of a Heritage Lottery Grant, archaeological work and historical research undertaken. The old wood goes forward with new interest, new care and a new future.



yellow archangel



siskin



speckled wood

Flora and fauna

To enter Gillfield Wood in late April or early May is to find misty swathes of bluebells or a few weeks earlier, carpets of wood anemones, a delightful picture of white on green. Both these wild flowers are strongly associated with ancient woodland, as are yellow archangel, yellow pimpernel, woodruff and wood melick. All these are present along with the delicate wood sorrel basking in the sunlight at the foot of many trees. A wide variety of flowers together with several species of ferns and grasses can be found. In excess of two hundred species of fungi have been identified.

From the main path in spring, listen for visiting chiffchaffs and blackcaps establishing territories to rear young. Speckled wood butterflies may spiral in front of you in dappled sunlight during the spring and summer months and the hawk dragonfly suddenly zip back and forth across your path just outside the wood. In winter, flocks of goldfinch and siskin, sometimes accompanied by lesser redpolls, feed in the tops of the larches and alders while long tailed tits and treecreepers move through the wood with feeding tit flocks. Sparrowhawks, great spotted woodpeckers, jays, mistle thrushes, coal tits, goldcrests and nuthatches are here throughout the year with common buzzards regularly drifting and calling over the wood.

Visit early morning and you may meet a small herd of red deer; visit in the evening and listen for tawny owls calling against each other or see pipistrelle bats hunting along the paths and edges.

Surrounded by farmland, this narrow piece of mixed woodland with the rich, clean brook meandering through it is, and almost certainly always has been, a real treasure trove of natural history interest.

great spotted woodpecker



Gillfield Wood



The story of
an ancient wood at Totley

Designed and printed by Design etc of Totley.
If you are interested in the work of the group or would like to become a member please visit www.friendsogillfieldwood.com or contact fogwsecretary@gmail.com.

Gillfield

an ancient wood

Gillfield or Gillyfield, hard or soft 'g' ? Locals can never quite agree, but this lovely wood, south of Totley in Sheffield and close to the open moorland of the Peak District National Park is a fascinating part of the landscape at the city's rural edge.

This is one of Sheffield's eighty or so ancient woods – meaning we have documentary evidence of it before 1600. This is supported by archaeological and geographical evidence and even through the particular flowers growing there.

Ancient woods are historical monuments. We think of them now as places to walk the dog, ramble on a Sunday or look at the bluebells, but to our ancestors they were a valuable commodity, managed for their products for various industries and crafts. Woods were a workplace then and many of us would have been kept out.

The wood's position at the edge of Totley – the Totley Brook running through it marks a manorial boundary with Holmesfield – together with its sinuous shape surrounded by small irregular fields, also tells us that this is an ancient wood. This shape is the result of 'assarting' probably in the medieval period, when sections were cleared piecemeal for agriculture. The aerial photograph shows this ancient woodland shape and parts of the 'ghost' wood. Many hedgerows are almost certainly several hundred years old and the remains of this assarting process. Nearby field names are Old English or Old Norse in derivation – for example, Stubbins and Storth Lees – and indicate that this was once woodland. 'Ley' in Totley's name means woodland clearing. Thus we know that the original wood was bigger.

Early records of the wood

The first document to name the wood is a 1561 survey in which it is referred to as 'a springe wood called Jyll felde.' A 'spring wood' means it was a coppice-with-standards, most trees cut at ground level on a regular cycle and allowed to spring back or re-grow to give a continuous supply of wood. Some trees, the standards, were allowed to grow as single stemmed trees. The wood was owned then by the Earl of Shrewsbury and leased to John Calton or Cawton of Totley.



However, the wood is almost certainly much older. The wood mentioned in Totley's entry in the Domesday Book in 1086 may be Gillfield – 'Wood pasturable, 1 mile in length and half a mile in breadth' – although we have no proof. 'Pasturable' means that animals – for example pigs eating acorns – would have been allowed in though they would have been kept out in the early years after the wood was coppiced.

Maintaining the manorial boundary must have been difficult given the changing course of the meandering brook and it would have been tempting to take wood from one side to another. In 1584 a Totley man, Henry Eliot, was fined by Holmesfield parish 'for carrying holly bowes into another Lordship.' Henry was a farmer and holly a valuable fodder crop.

We can gain an insight into the wood in the Tudor period from another document – an extract from the 1574 manuscript diary of William Dickenson, Bailiff of Hallamshire, the Earl of Shrewsbury's right hand man in Sheffield. Dickenson's diary tells us of a 'woode vewed and marked at Totteley the 17th of December 1574.'

The document is a stocktake of trees due to be felled or coppiced and refers to what are probably compartments of the wood – "the Carre trees" – possibly Broad Carr near where the bus terminus is now; "Fraunces Field" – which must refer to one of the pieces of land belonging to Mr Frances, an absentee landlord; "Husters" which may refer to the large peninsula on the north-east side near fields called The Husters; and two halves of "Long Springe" which aptly describes the long sinuous shape of the main wood. Around a thousand trees in the wood – mostly "young spyeres" – that is oak of about twenty years growth – are marked for felling and valued. A dozen are to be used for stakes, the rest for a variety of products. Some were possibly destined for use in smelting as the Earl was one of the country's largest metal manufacturers and owner of many local woods.



wood anemones

The wood and the lead smelting industry

The Derbyshire lead industry burgeoned from the middle of the sixteenth century, becoming an international trade using new smelting methods. This new technology used bellows in water powered mills rather than the hit and miss methods employed on 'bole hills'. Totley had at least three of these mills on its brooks – the earliest being the Old Hay lead mill built in 1585 by the Earl of Shrewsbury. A letter to him says 'it is a pittie that ther is not wood to maintain it, being the most commodious milne in Derbshire.'

A great quantity of wood was indeed needed to maintain the leadmills. The smelting process used mostly 'whitecoal' – wood with all the moisture driven off mixed with smaller quantities of charcoal (charred wood). There is no doubt that Gillfield, along with other local woods, was important for whitecoal manufacture from the late sixteenth century for the next two hundred years. It is probable that at least thirty of the pits recorded in the wood are the remains of whitecoal kilns – roughly circular depressions, usually on a slope with a spout pointing downhill. Whitecoal was superseded by coke in the eighteenth century and no-one knows exactly how it was made. Look out for these kiln remains alongside the path. Evidence of charcoal hearths have also been found.



remains of whitecoal kiln

Apart from these kilns and hearths, there is more evidence of past industrial activity – for example a possible work area including a saw pit and stone posts erected at various points in the brook, possibly connected with damming.



Work and play in the woods



besom maker, 1930s

We know that Gillfield was still a coppice-with-standards in 1700 when a substantial amount of wood and timber was sold by Robert Moore of Clements Inn, London to Robert Greenwood, a lead smelter in Dronfield. Trees not to be cut were marked RM probably with red ochre paint, known locally as 'ruddle' or 'raddle'. Greenwood agreed to leave a ring fence of mature trees around the boundary of the wood which may account for some of the oldest trees still being found there.

During the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century the wood was owned by three generations of the Coke family. We have Coke's accounts of sales from Gillfield Wood. Much of the wood was sold as poles or cut into 4 foot lengths as 'cordwood' showing that coppicing was still occurring. Most of the coppice poles were sold to local farmers for stakes and bindings for hedge laying. A Mr. Denton buys '40 Bunch Bean Rods' for 16/8d; oak bark was sold to Peter Potter Birks and Son of Woodhouse who were tanners, curriers and leather



bark peeler



basket maker

merchants; cordwood was bought by Thomas Kilner at the nearby Totley Chemical Works and used to make pyroligneous acid and its by-products naphtha and charcoal. George Peat, a besom broom maker from Dore, bought 2,300 'beesom staves' - broom handles. There are records of local men being paid for cutting, barking, sorting, stacking and carrying and repairing fences and gates, for example, "William Topliss' (a Chesterfield timber merchant) 'for Fencing Totley Woods'. George Oates was Cokes' superintendent of the wood and was paid for 'looking over woods to keep out trespassers'. Some of the trees named in the woodland accounts such as larch, spruce, Scots pine and beech are likely to have been planted sometime in the nineteenth century.

William Aldam Milner and his wife Sarah owned the wood from 1883 to 1931 and it became a private playground for the family who picnicked, shot pheasants, fished in the brook and made a bathing pool (which many older people still remember). Jo Rundle, a servant at Totley Hall, remembers preparing woodcock and snipe for the family table. Woodcock still fly or 'rode' over the wood at dusk today.

