

Broadleaf Woodland: important habitats along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

A CHAIN OF SIX IRON AGE HILLFORTS dominates the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. Around their earthen ramparts stretches a mosaic of broadleaved woodland, species-rich grassland, and open heath, flanked by meres and mosses. These varied yet fragile habitats support unusual plants and animals, many of them adapted to specific historic land uses.

By restoring and enhancing these increasingly threatened landscapes, the vision is to create an interconnected and expanding network of woodlands, grasslands, wetlands and heath around the hills that will benefit both people and wildlife for years to come.

In a Green Shade

Britain's ancient broadleaved woodlands are places of timeless beauty, full of silences and dappled shade. Step into an open glade in spring or early summer and the woodland floor is likely to be carpeted with lesser celandines, primroses and wild garlic, followed by bluebells, wood sorrel and wood anemones — all backed by birdsong.

Our ancient semi-natural woodlands are home to more rare and threatened species than any other UK habitat. These rich wildlife communities have developed over four or more centuries and depend on stable conditions. As the UK Biodiversity Plan recognises, ancient woods are uniquely valuable.

Broadleaf Woodland

Ancient semi-natural woodland supports a huge number of rare and threatened species

Yet between 1930 and 1985 roughly half of Britain's ancient semi-natural woodland was either permanently cleared or converted to plantation. Currently, less than a fifth of our ancient woodlands are protected as either Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Special Areas of Conservation. The rest have no legal protection.

Out of the Wildwood

In the remote past broadleaved woodland covered much of the British Isles. As the ice sheet retreated at the end of the last Ice Age, around 12,000–10,000 years ago, the climate warmed and trees spread across lowland Britain. Romantically called the wildwood, this primeval forest was the ancestor of today's ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodland. This vast forest was broken only by high ground, wetland, and the action of large animals such as aurochs that are now extinct.

The first Neolithic farmers felled clearings to grow crops. Pollen trapped in the sediment of pools such as Peckforton Mere and Hatchmere shows a decline of trees such as elm and a rise in grasses and other 'weeds of cultivation' around 3000BC. Forest clearance increased from the late prehistoric period onwards. The same pattern of woodland removal and mixed agriculture continued into the Middle Ages. By 1086, woodland cover in lowland Britain may have been as low as 15%. Ancient woodland is central to our national heritage.



Cheshire Woodland

Britain is now one of the least wooded countries in Europe. Trees cover less than a tenth of our land, compared to roughly a third in most other European countries. Even so, Britain's tree cover has more than doubled in the last 100 years, and is currently at its highest for two centuries.

In flat and fertile Cheshire, the figure is lower still with only around 4% woodland cover, of which just 1% is ancient semi-natural woodland. Much of this is concentrated on the high ground and steep slopes along the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge. These lovely wooded hills are in marked contrast to the open farmland of the plain below, and help define the ridge's 'local



Bluebells

Fragrant bluebells carpet the sunny woodland floor in spring

“Ancient woodland is home to more rare and threatened species than any other UK habitat.”

Woodland Trust, *Position Statement: Ancient Woodland*, 2010

distinctiveness'. The old oak, birch and holly woods are rich in insects, bats and birds, including uncommon breeding species such as pied flycatchers, wood warblers, redstarts, ravens, buzzards and goshawks.

Future Woodland?

Sadly, Cheshire's ancient semi-natural woodlands are still under threat. The loss of traditional woodland management erodes their varied structure, while the removal of fallen timber and old trees destroys the habitat of countless insects and the birds and bats they feed. Yet, despite that, the biggest threat to our ancient broadleaved woodlands is fragmentation. Most ancient woodlands are too small to support viable populations of woodland species, and too isolated to allow them to migrate in the face of climate change. The alternative is local extinction.

Our ancient woodlands are irreplaceable. They must be protected and managed to preserve and enhance their distinctive character. The priority in Cheshire is to restore the health of existing ancient semi-natural broadleaved woodlands by protecting them against damage and development, and restoring them using traditional management techniques.

Within the Mersey Forest and elsewhere, significant areas of new native woodland have been created in recent years to help link the existing fragmented patches of ancient broadleaved woodland back into a larger, more sustainable network of woodland habitat. As these new woodlands grow, they will provide new homes for threatened woodland plants and animals, and enhance the quality of life of Cheshire people for generations to come.

A series of other guides is available. Look out for four walks leaflets, four habitat leaflets, and six hillfort leaflets.

CASE STUDY

Woodland Management on Frodsham Hill

THREE BROADLEAVED WOODLANDS adorn the northern end of Cheshire's sandstone ridge. These lovely open woods are largely owned and managed by the Woodland Trust. Collectively they form the second largest continuous block of broadleaved woodland in the county.

The steeper parts of Frodsham Hill Wood and Woodhouse Wood contain areas of ancient semi-natural woodland, while, as its name suggests, Snidley Moor Wood has developed from open heathland grazed by cattle and sheep until the 1930s.

Today, the Trust manages the mixed oak and birch woods with minimum intervention. Dangerous branches and invasive rhododendron are removed and paths are cleared to ensure safe and easy access to the public. Elsewhere, old fields have been planted with a range of native trees. Together, they create a superb network of habitats rich in biodiversity.

“New areas of native trees protect and expand existing broadleaved woodlands for the benefit of both wildlife and people.”

Neil Oxley, Woodland Trust Site Manager



Key habitats Broadleaf Woodland



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www.sandstoneridge.org.uk

Concept and text: Tony Bowerman

Illustrations: Kim Atkinson

Design: William Smuts

