

Secrets of the Wrekin Forest

Deer leaping silently between mossy oaks; the hammering of a woodpecker; a blackbird turning over leaves, searching for food – these are some of the images that might come to mind when you think of the word ‘forest’. Something we don’t think about so much today is of woods being a place of work, a source and location of industry. Historically though, our woods have played a strong role in the economy, providing people with a valued source of fuel and materials.

People have lived and worked in the Wrekin Forest for thousands of years, delving into the ground for rock and coal; making use of the trees. A Bronze Age burial ground at the top of the Wrekin gives us the earliest evidence of human habitation, while the hill later became the capital of the Cornovii tribe, home to chieftains, druids, warriors, their families and servants. The Romans made Wroxeter their fortress; it grew to be the fourth largest city in Britain. It was the Romans who started the habit of plundering the hills here for road stone; rocks dug from the flanks of the Ercall were used to build Watling Street, the ancient trackway running from Wroxeter to London.

A walk around the Wrekin soon brings you in touch with the past. Evidence of lives lived in or at the edges of the Forest can be found in the traces of dwellings; humps of rocks among the trees and along road edges. Meanwhile, hundreds of years of rock and mineral extraction have left their mark on the woods with disturbed ground, spoil tips, underground workings, trackways and exposed quarry faces. Bell pit mounds can be found in New Works wood and Little Worth, relics of early coal mining ventures, which involved driving shallow shafts down to reach the coal beneath.

An outcrop of limestone curving through the Wrekin Forest was also heavily exploited. Old workings exist at the Hatch, Little Wenlock and down through Limekiln Woods. The monks of Buildwas Abbey instigated quarrying at the Steeraway Limestone Works in the 13th century and operations continued for a further six hundred years, finally ceasing in 1900. In the woods the remains of the kilns and the loading area can still be seen. The lime was used as flux in the blast furnaces at Lawley in the 1700s, removing impurities in the iron ore and also as a top dressing in agriculture, to raise the ph levels on acidic soils.

Small-scale charcoal burning has been carried out in the Wrekin Forest for thousands of years, reaching a peak at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Charcoal burns at a very high temperature, making it an ideal fuel for the extraction of iron ore. Before Abraham Darby’s invention of the coke smelting process, the fiery furnaces at Lawley and Ironbridge consumed vast amounts of charcoal every day; timber was in great demand and the woods coppiced hard to feed the demand. Now the trees have been allowed to grow back, yet throughout the woods you can still find the remains of the old charcoal burning hearths. More than 120 have been recorded around the Wrekin, powerful evidence of a once-lively industry, which disappeared from these woods only in the 1930s.

Centuries of quarrying have left their scars, but they are interesting ones, telling a story of how people made their living. Nature has made a comeback too, transforming industrial ravages into romantic ruins. Quarrying may have carved unnatural-shaped holes in our hills but wind-borne seeds have sown themselves into cracks and crevices; into the thin soils that soon covers the quarry floor as leaves blow down from trees and decay. Limestone especially is wonderful for wildflowers, with ferns, orchids and sweet woodruff. Beautiful butterflies such as the green hairstreak now find refuge on plants that have colonised the ground in the post-industrial era.

People have been drawn to the Wrekin area for pleasure as well as work for centuries. From the fairs which would have taken place on the Wrekin hillfort, to the riotous Wrekin Wakes and the hugely popular attractions of the Forest Glen, the area's recreational opportunities have been highly valued. The Wrekin Forest today is a cherished refuge for thousands of local people. But while its quarries may have fallen silent, letting nature reclaim its ancient hold, considerable challenges remain, not least the renewed threat of opencast mining at New Works. The Wrekin's very popularity also brings potential problems which must be addressed if the woods and its wildlife are not to suffer. Fortunately, the Wrekin Forest Partnership has been set up to do just this.

The Wrekin Forest is a place full of stories and memories. It is also just like the forests of our imagination; singing with birds; drifts of bluebells in May; herds of fallow deer slipping quietly between the ancient oaks. We need to look after it.