SMITHY WOOD:

A brief history and an appraisal of the significance of the site

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ITS NAME

The name **Smithy Wood** immediately tells us of the antiquity of woodland on this site (Smith, 1961). It has long been believed that the name Smithy Wood relates to the utilisation of the ironstone seam (Clayband Ironstone) that lies beneath it and for the charcoal from the trees growing on the site (they would have been coppiced to ensure a sustainable supply) by the monks of Kirkstead Abbey in Lincolnshire. The monastery was granted a large site on nearby Thorpe Common (about a mile to the east) in which to establish a grange (an outlying economic unit) by Richard de Busli the Norman lord of the manor in 1161 on which to establish two furnaces and two forges. About the same date they were also granted several hundred acres in the adjoining parish of Ecclesfield by the lord of the manor of Hallamshire, Richard de Lovetot. Significantly, the ancient name for what is now Kirkstead Abbey Grange is the Monks' **Smithy** Houses (Hall, 1937).

Stained glass window in the chapter house, Sheffield cathedral depicting the Kirkstead Abbey monks manufacturing iron at their grange on Thorpe Common

No doubt throughout the rest of the medieval period after the departure of the monks (the Thorpe Common site became part of the lord of the manor's deer park in the second half of the thirteenth century) Smithy Wood would have been used successively as wood pasture and a coppice wood.

LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURY RECORDS OF WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

Smithy Wood then appears in documentary records of around 1600 and 1637 as **a spring wood**, that is **a coppice-with-standards**. In such a wood most of the trees are felled every 20-30 years and grow back as multiple stemmed coppice or underwood. Some trees, predominantly oak, are left to grow as single-stemmed trees (these are the standards). The coppice was used for making charcoal and as the raw material for a wide variety of woodland crafts such as basket-making, coopering and besom-making, while the standards were used in building projects (houses, cottages, barns, water-powered mills).

Diagrammatic representation of a wood managed as coppice-with-standards. Note the boundary bank with a pollard, coppice stools cut in two different years and standards of various ages.

The evidence from about 1600 comes from an undated letter sent to the 7th Earl of Shrewsbury who succeeded to the title in 1592 and died in 1616 (Shrewsbury Papers in Lambeth Palace Library, Manuscript 698, Folio 3). The entries for Smithy Wood and Cowley Old Spring (the old name for part of Smithy Wood) are given below.

Smithy Wodd –11 yeares ould – 50 acres

Ould Cowley Springe – 11 yeares old – 20 acres

The entries are very significant for a number of separate reasons. First, it should be noted that the document was listing woods 'belonging to your Lordship's forges' and therefore was only concerned with the coppice growth that would be the principal raw material for making charcoal, and not with the timber trees. The writer specifically noted that 'great timber' was not included in his survey. It is the coppice that is said to be 11 years old. Secondly, although the acreages quoted suggest that either the whole of the wooded areas were not listed or that not all of the wooded areas were coppiced, the ages of the underwood given put both woods in or very near the critical date – AD1600 – for their definition as ancient woods: even if the list was compiled in 1616 both wooded areas would have been lasted coppiced in 1605.

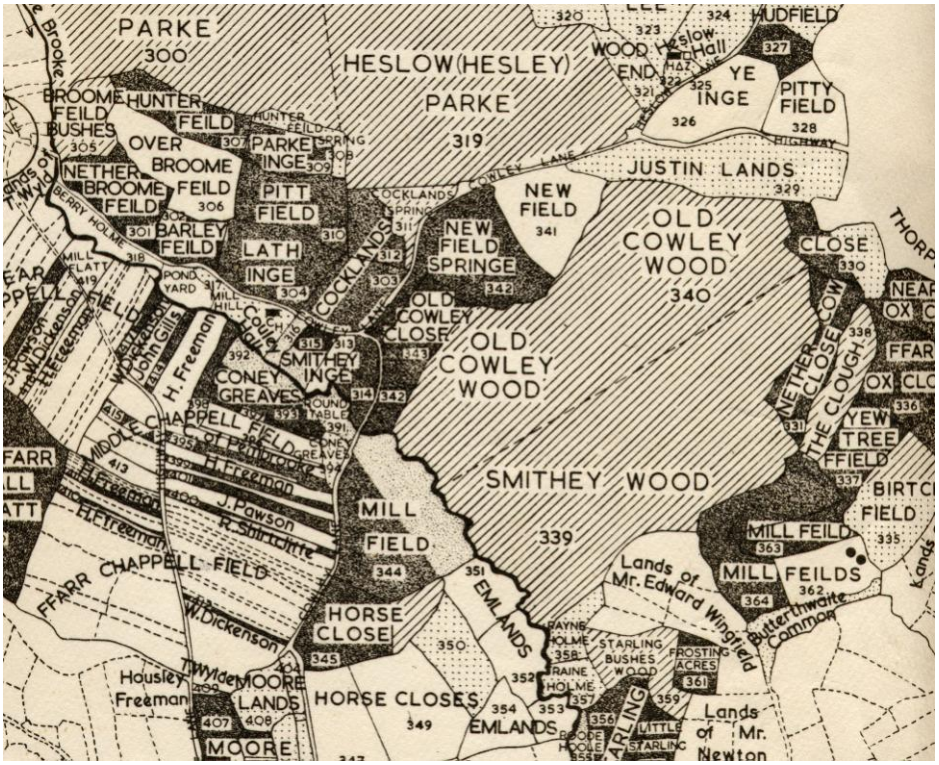
The second document is John Harrison's *An Exact and Perfect Survey and View of the Manor of Sheffield of 1637* that was transcribed and published by J. G. Ronksley in 1908. Unfortunately none of the accompanying maps survived. However, in a series of articles analysing this important survey, the late Gordon Scurfield and Irene Medley put together a series of maps based on the survey entries and one of these was published in the *Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society* in 1955 in an article entitled 'An historical account of the vegetation in the Sheffield district: The Parish of Ecclesfield in 1637'. The entries in the survey relating to Smithy Wood/ Old Cowley Spring are as follows Ronksley, p. 292):

339 Item a Spring Wood of 40 yeares growth lying betweene old Cowley Wood North & ye lands of Edward Winfield in part South & abutteth upon the last piece east and Blackurne brooke west and Cont 87 acres 2 roods and 00 perches.

340 Item old Cowley wood lying betweene ye 3 last pieces North west, Justing lands North east & Smithy wood South & abutteth upon the Lords lands in the use of James fforster west and Cont.. 70 acres, 1 rood and 20 perches.

The main point to note above is that the surveyor, as in the Earl of Shrewsbury document, was concerned to note the age of the coppice growth not the timber trees.

Scurfield's map of Smithy Wood/ Old Cowley Wood is shown below (Scurfield, 1955). Its shape is typical of ancient coppice woods: there are no straight lines only sinuous or zig-zag boundaries, the result of woodland clearance over many centuries.



Smithy Wood (i.e. Old Cowley Wood and Smithy Wood) in 1637 (Scurfield & Medley, 1955)

Smithy Wood as a coppice wood continued to be mentioned in woodland accounts throughout the seventeenth century. For example it is listed in the accounts of Edmund Morphy, the Duke of Norfolk's woodward, in 1676-77 in a long list of spring woods from which timber, underwood, cordwood (four –foot lengths of underwood used for making charcoal), bark (for local tanneries) and 'ramell'(small branches and twigs used in basket-making and besom-making) had been extracted and sold (ACM 277).

Even more interesting is that Smithy Wood was named in a list of 19 woods in 1682 in which **herbage** had taken place (ACM 278A). Herbage was a local variant on the term **agistment** or **gist**, meaning the grazing of tenants' farm livestock (cattle and horses) on the grasses and herbs in coppice woods once the coppice was well grown and beyond possible damage from browsing. Herbage only took place at specific times and for specific lengths of time. At all other times grazing animals were kept out of the coppice woods by boundary walls, banks and hedges. If animals did get into woods they were placed in the village pinfold and the owner fined. Surviving banks and walls around old coppice woods are important woodland archaeological features. A bank with a revetted

wall still survives on the edge of Smithy Wood where the wood survives on the Thorpe Hesley side of the M1 motorway.

What all these pre-1700 references to Smithy Wood mean is that the site is an **ancient wood,** i.e. one that is known from documentary evidence or from a combination of archaeological, botanical and geographical clues to have already been in existence at some critical threshold date in the past, some writers such as George Peterken using AD 1600 and others such as Oliver Rackham, AD 1700. The significance of these dates is that it was only after these dates that trees were planted on any scale in this country to form woods. **What this means is that any wood already in existence by 1600 or 1700 would almost certainly have been the descendant of a medieval working wood, an area of woodland conserved, named and managed, not wildwood, not natural woodland but semi-natural woodland, influenced by human activity over hundreds and in some cases over thousands of years.**

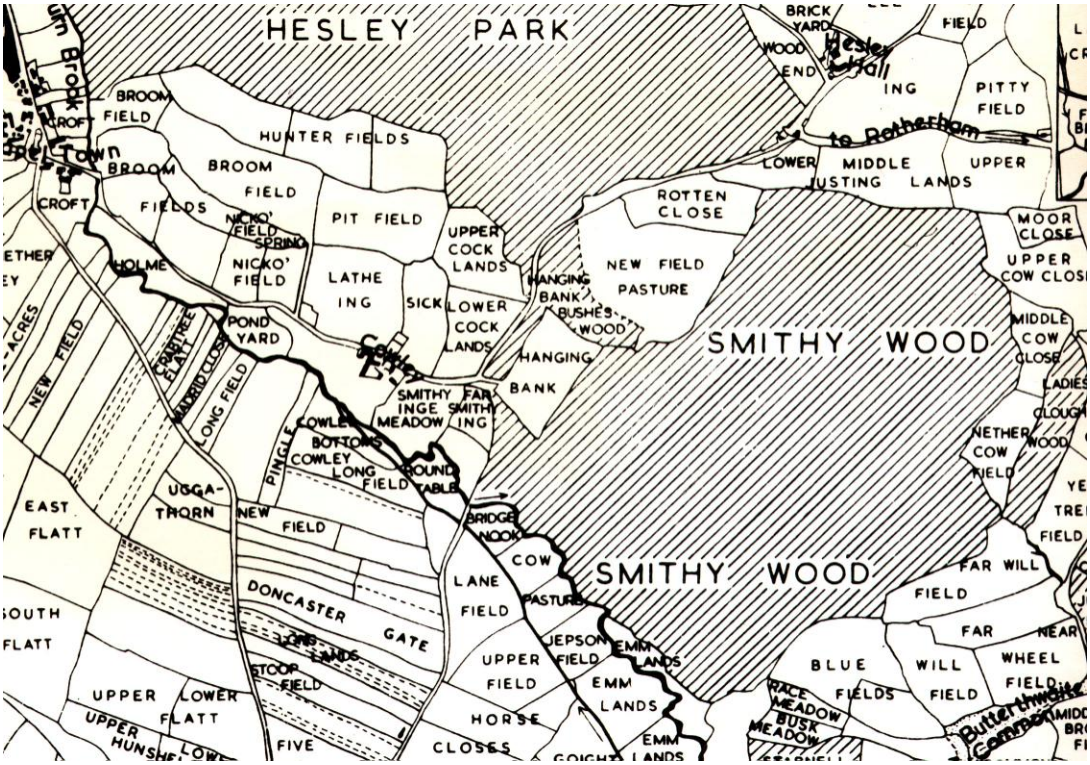
EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY WOODLAND MANAGEMENT RECORDS

Records of woodland management on the site continue throughout the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century, when Smithy Wood continued to be managed as a coppice-with-standards.

For example in the early eighteenth century a set of very detailed accounts of the Duke of Norfolk's woods has survived (Arundel Castle Manuscripts ACM 327 in Sheffield Archives, analysed by Jones, 1997). In these records management of SmithyWood is mentioned on a number of occasions. In 1715 in preparation for the felling of the coppice Abraham Ibbotson and Mathew Northall 'assisted Mr Stanley of Howbrook to make ye divisions in Smithy Wood', that is dividing that part of wood to be felled into sections and marking the location of rides for extracting the underwood and timber. The accounts then go on to mention the payment of four shillings at Thorpe for 'ale and meat' for the work party as they set about marking 'ye **reserves**', i.e. the standard trees that were not to be felled. This is sometimes referred to as '**raddling**', as a red ochre paint called **raddle** was used. The raddled trees were **not** to be felled. In 1720 it is recorded that four days were spent 'raddling weavers' in another part of Smithy Wood. A weaver was the local version of the word **waver**, a standard tree that had only grown through one coppice cycle, and therefore was only 20-30 years old. The raddled wavers would be left to grow on to become older and bigger standard trees known locally as **black barks** and **lordings**.

After the felling of coppice it was important to protect the new growth from grazing animals which might trespass from surrounding farmland. This meant that walls had to be repaired and new stockproof hedges planted where they had been taken down to remove wood and timber. In 1716, for example, after the 1715 ‘fall’ had been completed it was recorded that William Walker and his partner were paid £1-19-08 for completing 136 roods (about 700 metres) of ‘Spring hedging betwixt Smithy Wood and Jonathan Wingfield’s close’. **Spring hedging** was a new stockproof hawthorn hedge around that part of the wood.

By 1790, as William Fairbank’s map (Fairbank Collection in Sheffield Archives) shows Smithy Wood was still very largely the same size and shape as it had been more than 150 years earlier in 1637.



Smithy Wood in 1790 (Fairbank Collection, Sheffield Archives)

Woodland management records continue into the nineteenth century and these show the continued management of Smithy Wood as a coppice wood. In 1839, for example accounts show the cost of ‘setting out the fall’ in the wood, i.e. the raddling of the reserves and weavers and marking out the divisions and rides from which the underwood and timber would be extracted (ACM 293).

A forerunner of later changes occurred in 1854 when the South Yorkshire Railway's Blackburn Valley line cut a narrow swathe through the wood. The line officially opened to passengers and coal traffic in September 1854.

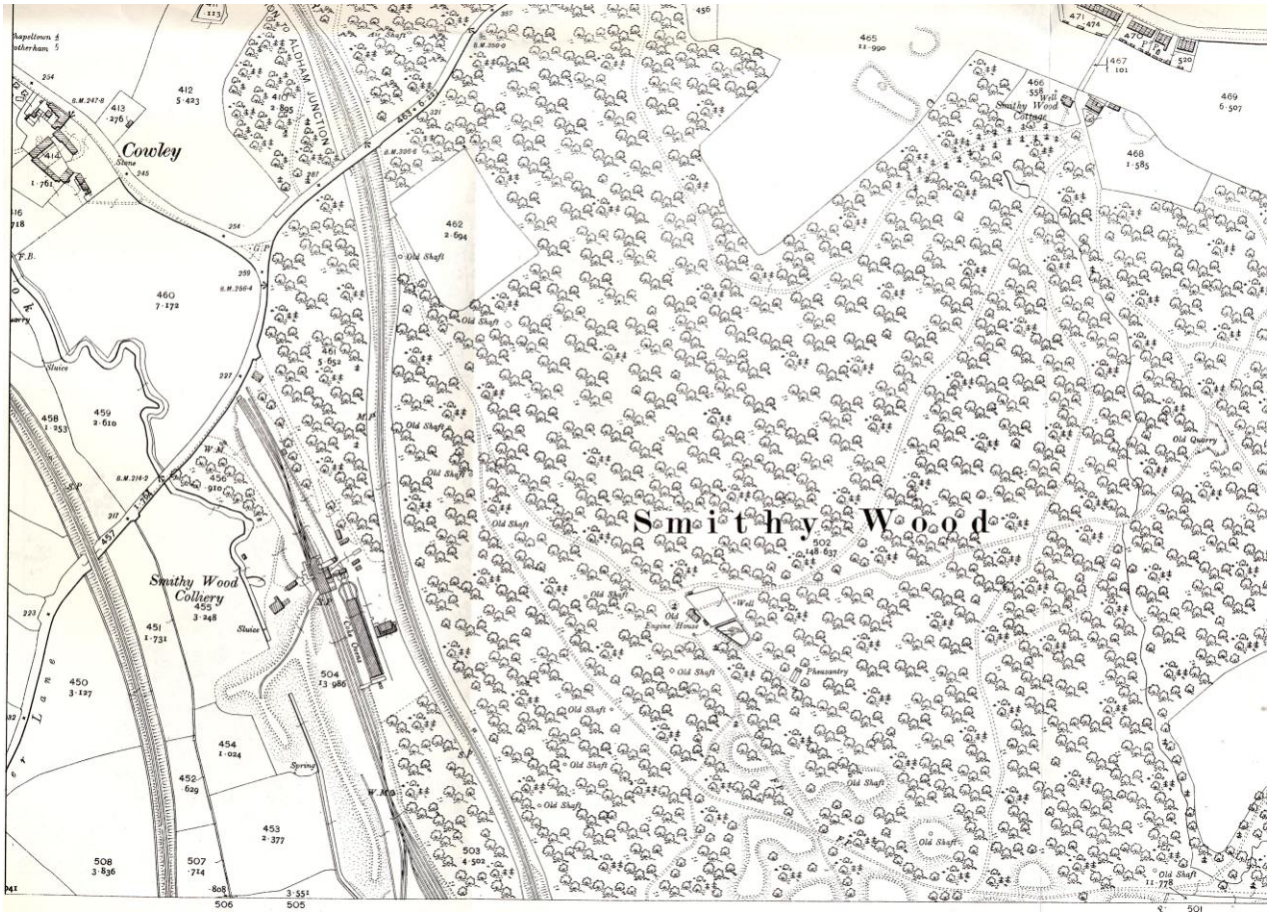
In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the wood continued to be managed by the Duke of Norfolk's estate as coppice-with-standards. And as throughout the previous 250 years every time a fall of wood and timber took place, the woodland boundaries were carefully repaired to stop grazing animals from ruining the next crop. In 1884 for instance the accounts reveal the cost of getting stone (from a quarry), carting it to the wood and making new walls and repairing others. Gates were also repaired at the same time (ACM S308). Timber, coppice wood and bark were all major products. An important customer for the underwood at this time was Vaughan & Co of Grimesthorpe who made charcoal, for use as a fuel in the steel industry (cementation steel) and for use by moulders in iron and steel foundries. Much of the timber was bought by William Topliss, a Chesterfield timber merchant who bought timber in large quantities from local woods. In May 1873 this firm bought 4,187 feet of oak trees from Smithy Wood at a total cost of £489 and as late as 1897 the firm purchased 169 oak poles from the wood. Most of the oak bark in the wood in the second half of the nineteenth century went to Henry Clegg & Son, tanner and currier of Barnsley who had tanneries in Cawthorne and Denby Dale.

And of course the existence of a working wood had an impact on local employment. As late as the 1881 census living in cottages on the edge of the wood were John Archer, woodman; Jesse May, gamekeeper (there was a pheasantry in the wood); and Joseph Mallinson, wood steward. In 1891 living in the same cottages were Aaron Stacey, woodman; Timothy Weatherall, gamekeeper; William Ogden, charcoal burner; Joseph Mallinson, wood steward; and William Mallinson of the Ball Inn was a publican and woodman.

Coppicing in the wood came to an end towards the close of the nineteenth century. Sales of wood and timber on the Duke of Norfolk's estate had been in steady decline and it was decided to convert the coppice woods into **high forest** on a long-term rotation. The estate's woods were being put on hold. In 1898 the Duke's forester (a term that had supplanted the earlier 'woodward'), began to plant heavily in the declining coppice woods. In Hesley Wood and Smithy Wood he planned to plant 100 acres (40 ha) with ash, elm, sycamore, birch, lime, sweet chestnut and beech eight feet apart and 'filled up' at four feet intervals with larch. Another 120 acres (49 ha) were to be planted in the same way in Greno Wood, 75 acres (30 ha) in Canklow Wood, 60 acres (24 ha) in Beeley

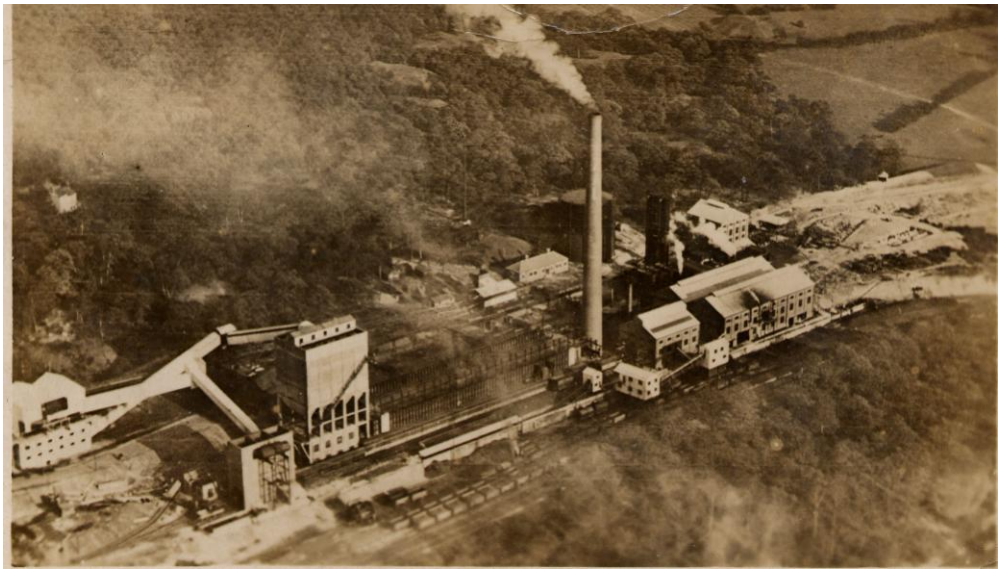
Wood, 40 acres (16 ha) in Bowden Housteads Wood, 35 acres (14 ha) in Highfield Spring, 25 acres (10 ha) in Burnt Wood and Hall Wood and 20 acres (8 ha) in Woolley Wood, eight acres (3 ha) in Buck Wood and six acres (2.4 ha) in Treeton Wood. He calculated that he would need 109,000 seedlings for Greno Wood alone. He also planned to plant 60 acres (24 ha) in Scraith Wood and Old Park Wood, but noted that as they were both 'situated Nr Sheffield and therefore affected by smoke etc Larch & conifers would not grow well', he suggested broadleaves only planted six feet apart. On 16 November 1898 he placed his first order with Dicksons, 'Seed Merchants and Nurserymen' of Chester, for 20,000 larch, 10,000 sycamore, 5,000 beech, 2,000 birch and 2,000 sweet chestnut to be delivered at Wadsley Bridge Station.

Further nails in the coffin for the wood as a whole came in the same decade in which large-scale planting was proposed. In the 1890s Newton Chambers of Thorncliffe Iron Works sank Smithy Wood Colliery and developed coke making in the lower part of the woodland site.



Part of Smithy Wood as shown on the 25 Inches to one mile OS map of 1901

In 1929 59 coke ovens of the most modern type were installed by Woodall-Duckham. The colliery closed in 1972 and the coking plant closed in the mid-1980s leaving a scarred derelict area where a large part of the ancient wood had once clothed the landscape. This is the site now occupied by the Smithy Wood Office & Business Park.



The modernized Smithywood Coking Plant shortly after its construction in 1929 with Smithy Wood occupying the slope behind it

Finally another wide swathe was cut through the wood to construct the M1 motorway in the 1960s.

CONCLUSION

The surviving fragment of Smithy Wood, like most of South Yorkshire's ancient woods, was a coppice wood for many centuries. These are the woods that have the greatest heritage value. It is the inherited characteristics of ancient coppice woods – their sites (often on sloping ground), their locations (on or near parish boundaries, as in this case where Ecclesfield parish abuts onto Rotherham parish), their shapes, their variety of plant life and the animals that inhabit them, their archaeology (in this case, for example, medieval bell pits, sawpits, charcoal hearths, boundary banks and walls and the living archaeology – old worked trees such as ancient coppice stools and stored coppice) and their often <u>long documented history</u> – that make them so special.

<u>They take us back to the roots of our history and are irreplaceable</u>.

THE FRAGMENT OF SMITHY WOOD THAT HAS SURVIVED IN THE FACE OF UNMERCILESS ABUSE OVER THE LAST CENTURY AND A HALF IS IRREPLACEABLE because it is ancient and part of our local heritage not least because of the wood's association with the first recorded documentary evidence of metal working in the Sheffield area.

Surely a brown field site between junctions 34 and 36 can be found for the proposed motorway service area? And why not use Meadowhall right beside the motorway with its myriad of existing facilities?

Rather than developing the site into a motorway service station, it ought to be securely fenced to keep out off-road vehicles and a long-term sympathetic management plan developed to encourage the regeneration of native trees, the spread of the ancient woodland ground flora and preservation of woodland archaeological features.

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