Exploring Frith Wood

Front cover: Aerial photograph of Frith Wood.

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A booklet prepared by

Steve Clegg

Moira Jenkins of the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust

Tim Hoverd, Christopher Atkinson and Neil Rimmington of Herefordshire Archaeology

Janet Parry of the Ledbury Naturalist's Field Club

Kate Wollen of the Forestry Commission

And with support from the

Malvern Hills
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
Sustainable Development Fund

March 2008

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Acknowledgements

The initial idea for the booklet came from Steve Clegg who put together a significant amount of information concerning the routes through Frith Wood together with an outline history of the wood. This information has been expanded upon by relevant specialists.

This booklet is the result of a community project and it is to those members of the local community that the first thanks must go. It is due to their dedication during a particularly wet and windy month that the survey work was completed. In particular thanks must go to Janet Cooper who assisted with co-ordinating the volunteer involvement.

The project was only possible through the support of the staff of the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership and the funding provided by their Sustainable Development Fund.

The project brought together organisations, societies and individuals from varied areas of interests covering archaeology, history, ecology, geology and forestry. Thanks go to the groups involved, which include the Victoria County History Trust for Herefordshire, England's Past for Everyone Project, the Forestry Commission, the Ledbury Naturalist's Field Club, the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust and Herefordshire Council's Archaeological Service.

Finally, it is with thanks that we acknowledge the efforts of the individual contributors to this booklet: Tim Hoverd, Christopher Atkinson, Moira Jenkins, Janet Parry, Kate Wollen, Steve Clegg, and Sylvia Pinches.

Introduction

Frith Wood is a 75 hectare wood, owned and managed by the Forestry Commission. It lies just to the north of Ledbury, occupying a roughly north-east/south-west aligned limestone ridge on the western edge of the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The wood is almost 2km long and 300m wide. The highest point of Frith Wood is called Bradlow Knoll at 260m above Ordnance Datum (OD).

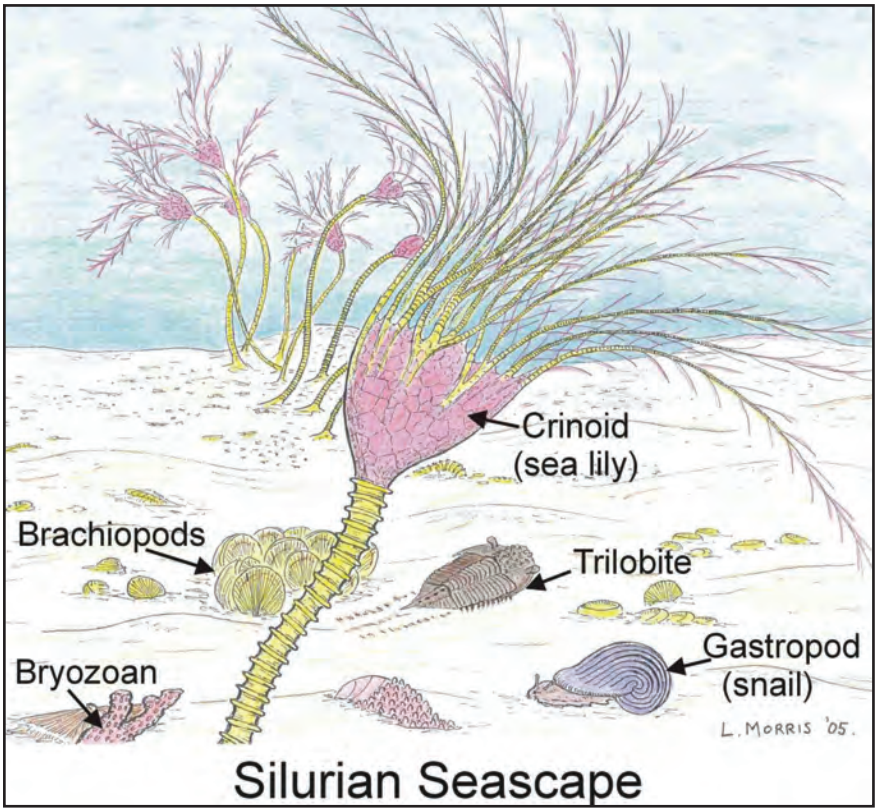
The tracks through Frith Wood provide an opportunity to explore an historic landscape on foot. Both the woodland boundaries and usage have changed with the passage of time, and traces of man's activities in the past are still visible today. The northwestern part of the wood is primarily chestnut coppice. The northeastern part is conifer and the southern end is old coppice; a mixture of ash, oak, chestnut, hazel, birch and some small-leaved lime.

Many of the tracks in Frith Wood have been given names by pupils of John Masefield School, Ledbury.

This booklet aims to introduce the reader to the story of Frith Wood by providing glimpses into its geology, history, ecology and management. A guided walk is included in the booklet and we hope you enjoy exploring Frith Wood.

The Origins of Frith Wood

It is hard to imagine, but about 420 million years ago (during the Silurian period) ago the whole area in and around Frith Wood was part of the bed of a tropical sea. Sediments were laid down in waters teeming with a variety of life.

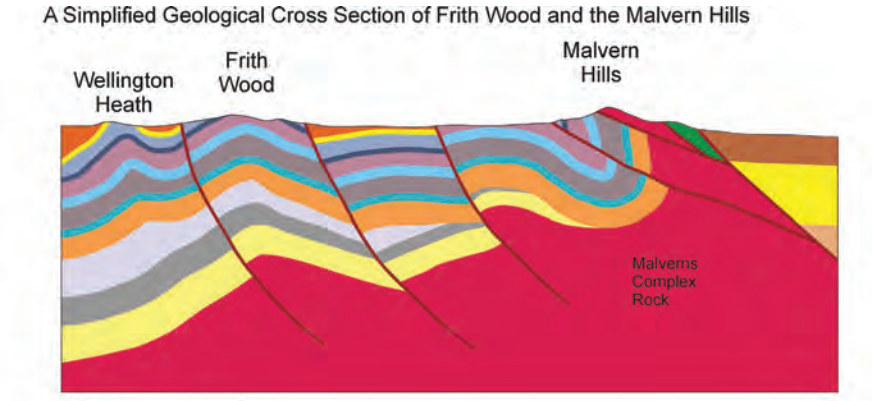


The remains of these creatures can be seen today as fossils in the rocks. By the side of the track known as Godwin's Rise there are outcrops of Silurian limestone and siltstone. Fossils can be found in the loose rocks at the base of the slope. In the Silurian Period this area was south of the equator and over time has moved gradually northwards with continental drift to its present latitude.

This picture shows fossil brachiopods, creatures that lived in the Silurian seas. The fossils seen in the picture are either casts (formed when the shells are infilled with sediment), impressions left in the sediment, or the actual shells.

A Transforming Landscape

After the formation of the limestones and siltstones, the seas became shallower as two plates of the Earth's crust (tectonic plates), moved towards each other. These two tectonic plates collided, creating a large continent and the resulting erosion led to the formation of sandstones. The force of the collision between the two plates resulted in the layers of limestone, siltstone and sandstone that had originally been laid in horizontal beds, being pushed and folded upwards, forming ridges, hills and even mountains. As you walk along the top path in Frith Wood you can see the ground sloping away steeply on either side of the narrow ridge. This reflects the underlying rock structure. There is an anticline, an upfolding of the rocks making the rocks on the eastern side of the hill dip to the east down the steep slope and on the western side of the ridge they dip to the west.



The rocks of Frith Wood are an anticline. They have been folded upwards forming a ridge and the layers on either side dip down

In places alongside the footpath to the west of Frith Wood you can see small outcrops of pale yellow sandstone. These, and the red coloured sandstones (part of the Old Red Sandstone) further west, were laid down by seasonal rivers crossing a landscape that had already become a dry land surface.

Frith Wood gives views to both the east and west that tell us more of how the surrounding landscape was formed.

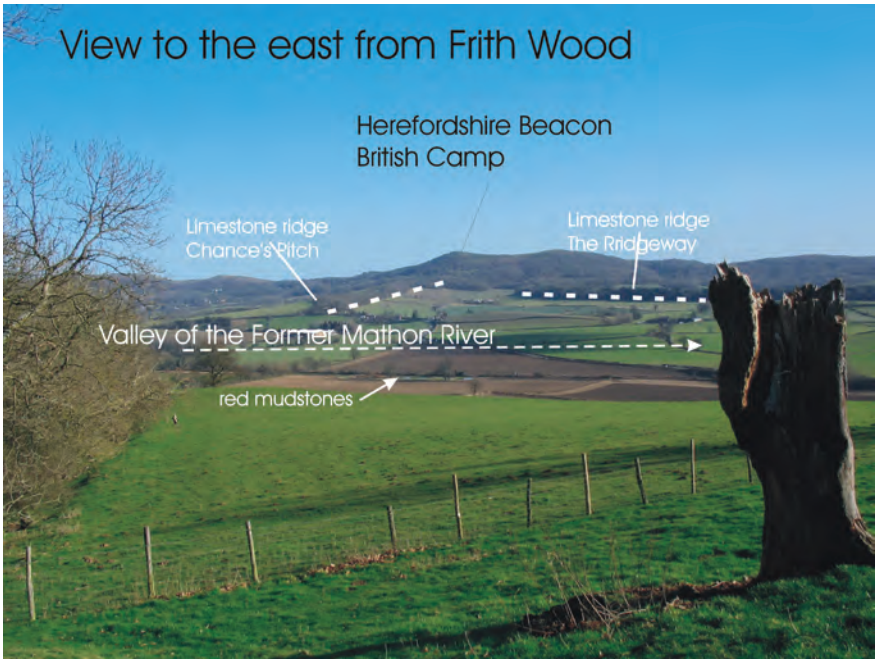
To the northwest is the small ridge on which Wellington Heath sits. This is a similar feature to Frith Wood – an anticline. The lower land between Frith Wood and Wellington Heath is underlain by softer rocks consisting mainly of mudstones that are more easily eroded. Similarly, mudstones are found beyond Wellington Heath in the Frome and Lugg valleys. Further away are hills that are capped with harder sandstone layers. The harder rocks, which resist erosion, stand up as hills while the valleys are formed where the softer rocks have been worn away. On a clear day, Pyon Hill can be seen with its distinctive conical shape.

Looking east as you emerge from Frith Wood on the footpath to Upper Mitchell Farm you can see the Malvern Hills. This long thin line of very old, crystalline Pre-Cambrian rocks, the oldest in

England, formed from magma deep below the surface which has been pushed up by earth movements along a line of weakness in the Earth's crust. To the west of the Malverns the rocks, like those at Frith Wood, have been steeply folded by the earth movements that pushed up the Malvern Hills. Running down from the Herefordshire Beacon (British Camp) are lines of woodland on ridges of limestone. Between Frith Wood and the Malvern Hills, the lower land is underlain by mudstone rock. The low land is part of the valley of the former Mathon River, a river that flowed from the north towards the south. During the Ice Age, the valley was blocked by ice. The river found a new route and now the Cradley Brook flows in the opposite direction from south to north and cuts through the line of the hills at Longley Green near Suckley. There is a remnant of the Mathon River in the much smaller Glynch Brook, which flows past Eastnor.

Looking to the southeast from the footpath that emerges from Frith Wood on Bradlow Knoll, you can see May Hill with its distinctive clump of trees. May Hill lies further south along the continuation of the line of the Malvern Hills and consists of Silurian rocks that are slightly older than those which form the ridge on which Frith Wood is located.

Frith Wood is within the Abberley & Malvern Hills Global Geopark (www.geopark.org.uk), an area of international geological significance that spans 700 million years of Earth history. The rocks of the Geopark tell a fascinating story of continental collisions, shallow tropical seas, hot deserts, tropical swamps, coastal lagoons, ice sheets and polar deserts.



Stepping Back in Frith Wood

The archaeology of Frith Wood provides us with a fascinating insight into the historical development of this area of woodland. A detailed series of 'snap-shots' relating to the changing land use of the area over the last two millennia can be built up by recognising earthwork features within the woodland and seeing how these relate to other features as well as to the natural topography. Whilst it is difficult to ascribe precise dates to many of the archaeological features within the wood, it is possible to place many of these features into broad historical periods. This enables us to create an historical account of the development of Frith Wood. This account documents not only how the wood has changed in shape and size, but also how the wood has been used and managed and the effects that these processes have had on the natural environment.

Early Beginnings

It would appear that most, if not all, of the ridge on which Frith Wood is located was open land in the Bronze Age (2300 – 700 BC). Evidence for Bronze Age activity can be seen at Bradlow Knoll. Here, on the highest point of the ridge, a circular mound can be seen approximately 15m in diameter and almost 2m high. This appears to be the earthwork remains of a Bronze Age round barrow – an earthen mound with a ditch surrounding it, under which one or more burials would be interred. Such barrows were often placed on prominent ridges and hilltops in order to be seen from considerable distances.

The presence of a barrow here is reflected in the Bradlow name; 'low' being derived from the Old English word '*hlaw'* meaning 'mound'.

One other feature may pre-date the existence of Frith Wood. This comprises a large bank and ditch that runs along the ridge top up to Bradlow Knoll, but interestingly it does not run over the round

barrow. The bank and ditch splits into two banks and ditches just before hitting Bradlow to run down the crests to two spurs and therefore apparently respecting the barrow. It is thought that this still impressive but much eroded feature represents a linear boundary for a late prehistoric or Roman estate.

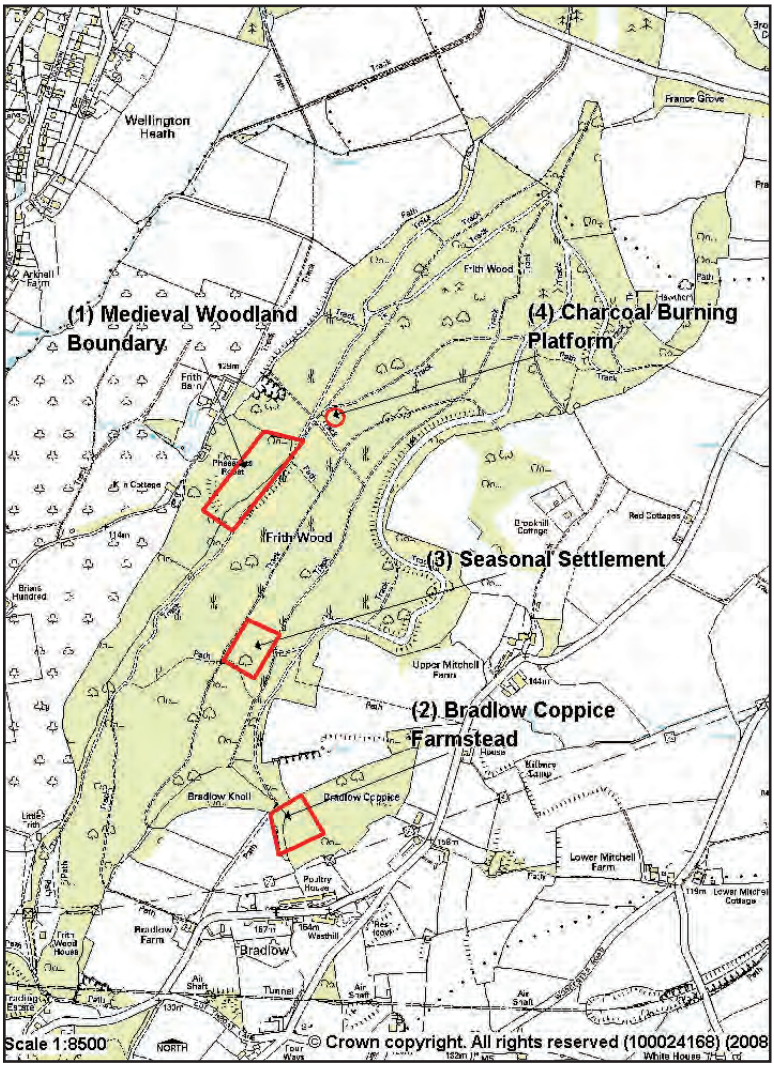


Figure 1: Frith Wood and the location of the sites referred to in the text

It is not known when Frith Wood came into being. Frith Wood takes it's name from the Anglo-Saxon word for wooded enclosure (*Fridd*) suggesting that there was a well established and sizeable area of woodland during this period, covering at least some of the area now covered by the present wood. This is supported by the entry in Domesday Book (1086) for Ledbury, which records *'…woodland half a league by a half*'; unfortunately no other details are given. It would seem logical that the ridge on which Frith Wood now stands was at least in part the area referred to in Domesday, as the topography would make any other type of intensive land-use difficult.

Fields and Farms

Despite the steepness of slope, some areas of Frith Wood have been incorporated into the surrounding medieval field system. These comprise areas of strip lynchets (terraces), field lynchets (like those in Bradlow Coppice), and areas of ridge and furrow. The field systems are predominantly located on the western side of the ridges. This appears to be linked directly to topography, in that the eastern faces are usually too steep for this type of land use. Within Frith Wood there is a series of massive lynchets close to the southern end of the wood. These comprise a series of five steps or terraces cut into the hill, each up to 3m high and 5m wide and over 150m long. Running along the top of this series of lynchets is a hollow way that leads from Bradlow Farm to The Frith (see Figure 3). The width and depth would suggest that this was once a major route. Lynchets are common in many of the woods within the east of the county and are usually associated with areas of ridge and furrow. When these areas of ridge and furrow and lyncheting are looked at together it is clear that very substantial areas of quite marginal land were under arable cultivation at one time or more.

This has a significant effect on our understanding of food production and population size in the medieval period in Herefordshire. Why were these areas being intensively cultivated? Why were sometimes huge amounts of labour being allocated to the construction of strip lynchets when the valley bottoms provide a more fertile and more

accessible arable resource? What reasons can there be for this huge investment in effort, for presumably often very limited returns?

One possibility is that the population of the region was such that food was in short supply and more marginal areas had to be put under the plough. Another possibility is that changes in climatic conditions made the cultivation of heavy silts and clays in more low-lying areas increasingly difficult. It is both of these factors that may have come into play. The features probably relate to the first half of the 14th century, when population pressure prior to the plague was combined with a period of increased rainfall and often severe flooding. Indeed, pottery of 14th century date has been recovered from the series of lynchets within Frith Wood.

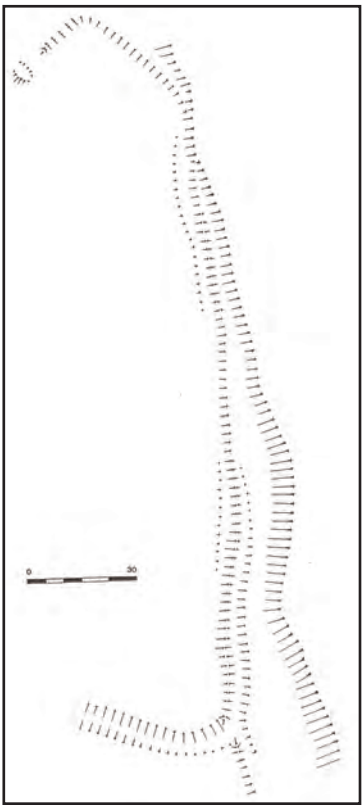


Figure 2: Scale plan of a 300m stretch of the late medieval woodland boundary bank

It would seem that this area of lynchets and their associated hollow way had fallen into disuse by the mid 14th century, when the post-plague population crash meant the area was no longer needed for cultivation and the area was either replanted or left to revert back to woodland. A woodland boundary bank (Figure 2) was constructed which ran over the top of the hollow way and enclosed the southern and western sides of Frith Wood. This can still be seen today and runs roughly parallel to the metalled forestry track.

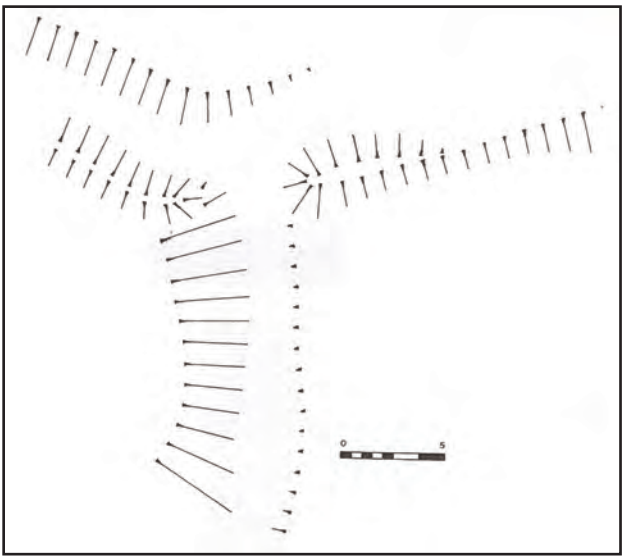


Figure 3: Scale plan indicating the relationship between the earlier hollow way and later boundary

Settlement associated with these field systems either takes the form of towns, villages and townships (for example Ledbury, Bosbury and Wellington Heath), or more isolated farmsteads. Several such farmsteads still survive in use today, like Upper Mitchell Farm. Occasionally, they have become deserted but still survive as ruins or earthworks. Such a site is located in Bradlow Coppice (Figure 1, location 2), where a farmstead and series of field lynchets survive (Figures 4 and 5). The earthworks suggest that there has been a farm here since at least the late medieval period and that the farmstead buildings have been rebuilt a number of times. It appears to have finally been abandoned in 1900.

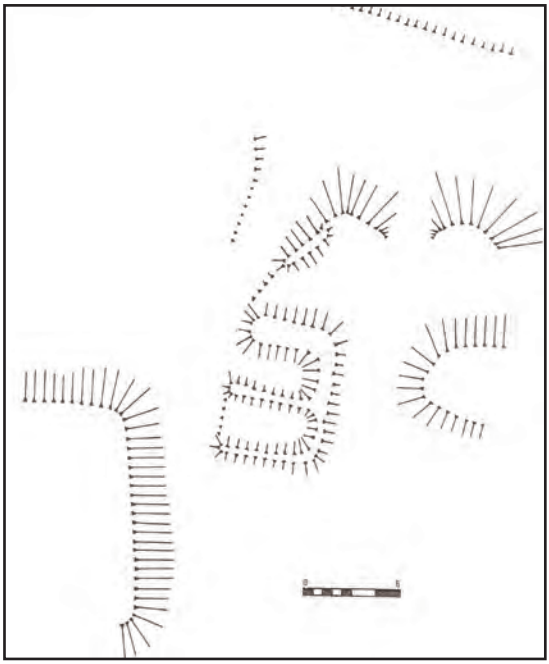


Figure 4: Scale plan of the remains of the Bradlow Coppice Farmstead

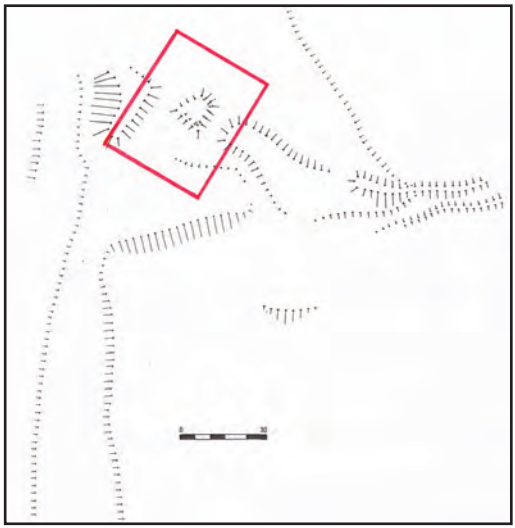


Figure 5: Scale plan showing the farmstead at Bradlow Coppice and the associated field system. The highlighted area indicates the farmstead location

Smoke and Noise

In addition to large, long established farmsteads, evidence survives within Frith Wood for the survival of smaller scale, seasonal settlement (Figure 1, location 3). This is associated with a spring and is located between a pair of later compartment boundaries. It is also associated with a small series of lynchets suggesting that some form of small-scale arable farming, or even gardening, may have been practised on a supplementary basis. Domestic structures at this height on the ridge would more normally have a primary association with seasonal stock keeping or woodland management.

An area of woodland such as Frith Wood required careful and often complex management in order to accommodate all of the industries and activities taking place. This was achieved by dividing up the wood into a large number of small areas or compartments so that these could be worked in strict rotation. Small banks and ditches often divided these compartments.

A large number of people would have worked and even lived on a seasonal basis in Frith Wood. The principal industries were the felling and processing of trees to provide lumber for building, and the coppicing of managed woodland to supply hop poles and to produce charcoal for use as fuel in furnaces and kilns. In addition to these woodland industries a considerable amount of small-scale quarrying would also have taken place to provide stone for building, maintaining roads and even turning into lime to act as a fertiliser.

In order to make charcoal, an area of level ground is required – a rarity within Frith Wood. Therefore charcoal-burning platforms (Figure 1, location 4) were constructed in the wood and several can still be seen today. These range in size from 5–10m in diameter and in the main comprised a level, circular platform cut into the hillside, with a pronounced down-slope lip upon which the clamp of cut timber could be stacked and burned.

Reconstruction of a charcoal-burning platform © Bryan Byron

When all these activities are put together Frith Wood would have been a smokey, noisy and bustling area with horses, carts and people involved in some very unpleasant tasks – definitely not the sort of place to go for a quiet stroll!

Woodland History from Archaeology

The survival of such a range of earthworks within Frith Wood has illustrated the complexity not only of the past woodland management, but also of the landscape as a whole. The number of compartment boundaries and woodland boundary banks recorded and their differing forms suggests a complex and long-lived woodland management system.

It appears that there was significantly less woodland within this area during the early medieval period or possibly earlier. Subsequently woodlands have expanded or have been newly established over a predominantly arable landscape, 'fossilising' features such as ridge and furrow, field lynchets and early settlement. During the Post-Medieval period the intensification of woodland management

can be seen in the large number of charcoal burning platforms and the intricate nature of the compartment boundaries. This intensive woodland management continued into the 19th and 20th centuries and included industrial-scale quarrying for both building materials and the production of lime.

Today Frith Wood is thought of as a peaceful place to stroll and appreciate our natural world and heritage.

Natural History of Frith Wood

Whenever you are walking in Frith Wood, there is always something of interest to see along the way.

The underlying geology and the woodland management are reflected in the plants growing in Frith.

The limestone ridge with its thin calcareous soil and varying amounts of light, depending on the tree canopy, affect what will grow. In spring there are wonderful carpets of Wood Anemone with a mixture of other common plants such as Primrose, Bugle, Yellow Archangel, Violets, and Bluebell. Even a few Wild Daffodils can be found adding to the colourful carpet. More unusual is the frequent occurrence of Wood Spurge.

Wood anemones carpeting the floor of the wood

Later in the year, as the leaf-cover develops, the main interest is alongside the rides where the light levels are higher. The very pretty Wood Vetch is abundant in places, especially at the north end and there are several species of St. John's Wort, as well as Bird's-Foot-Trefoil, Wild Strawberry and Devil's-Bit Scabious along the way.

You may be lucky enough to find both Early-Purple and Common-Spotted Orchids in early summer. The two rarest flowers recorded recently in the woods are Violet Helleborine and Spreading Bellflower, which are both of national interest. In all, the Ledbury Naturalists' Field Club recorded 154 species of flowering plants in Frith wood in 2003.

The abundance of flowering plants attracts many insects. Whilst you may easily spot butterflies such as Red Admiral and Ringlet, there are also many less obvious insects such as moths, flies, beetles, bugs, bees, wasps and crickets. Over 200 species were recorded in 2003.

The birds follow the insects so keep your eyes and ears open for the Chiffchaff and Cuckoo in spring as well as the Woodpeckers and other common woodland birds. You may see larger birds of prey such as Goshawk and Kestrel, though they prefer the more open land around the edges of the wood.

In autumn, the deciduous trees lose their leaves and the fungi are more obvious. Look out for the easily recognisable Fly Agaric with it’s bright red and white spotted cap and the Scarlet Elf Cup, which is well named. Your nose could lead you to a Stinkhorn and the bracket fungi such as the Birch Polypore is easy to see, like a small shelf sticking out on the trunks of some Birch trees.

Throughout the year the ferns and mosses abound, especially in the darker and damper areas and have their own beauty if you look closely, especially in wet weather.

So keep your eyes and ears open and enjoy the rich diversity of plants and animals that are on your doorstep.

Managing the Wood Today

Frith Wood covers 75 hectares and is owned and managed by the Forestry Commission. The Forestry Commission has owned the wood since 1959 and has in the past managed it to produce commercial timber. Today the priorities for management in the wood are different. They are to conserve the high landscape value of the woodland and its high ecological value, in particular where the ancient woodland vegetation persists. The provision of a local amenity for informal recreation on foot is important and the production of timber continues.

The majority of trees are broadleaved such as Sweet Chestnut, Oak, Ash, Cherry, Birch with some Sycamore and Small-Leaved Lime. The conifer species that were planted in the 1960s and the 1970s are mainly Douglas Fir and Norway Spruce, with some Western Red Cedar and Western Hemlock. Over half of the wood is considered to be ancient semi-natural woodland, which is believed to have been a continual native species woodland cover since 1600AD and the remainder is woodland planted on an ancient woodland site. Halfway along the main forest road in the wood, on a woodland boundary bank, is a large, ancient Small-Leaved Lime tree. This has been managed in the past as a pollard; a process similar to coppicing, except the tree is cut about two metres off the ground. Cutting at this height prevents stock from browsing the re-growing stems. Small-Leaved Lime was a major component of many of the woodlands in this area over 2000 years ago.

As with many ancient woods, it appears that Frith was managed as a coppice with standards. This traditional management involved cutting the broadleaved trees every 15 to 20 years and using the timber for many products such as sheep hurdles, tool handles, toys, pegs and charcoal. The cut stumps then re-grow multiple stems, ready to be harvested again in a few years, making this the ultimate renewable resource.

One of many coppiced chestnuts within Frith Wood

The standard trees were left to grow on, to become big timber providing wood for building and larger items. On the ridge beside the path, there are some huge, old coppiced Sweet Chestnut trees, now grown out, originally managed for hop poles and fencing, a remnant of days gone by.

Coppicing areas of a wood allows sunlight to get to the woodland floor, encouraging flowering plants to grow which in turn support the associated insects, birds and animals. This traditional management on an ancient woodland site with the underlying mix of sandstone and limestone soils has resulted in a varied woodland flora and fauna.

Small areas of the Frith are being re-coppiced today and broadleaved standards are still felled periodically to provide high quality timber for furniture making and building. The conifers will be gradually thinned and removed over the next two decades, allowing broadleaves to flourish once again over the whole wood.

A Walk through Frith

General Information

In order to walk through Frith wood, you first have to get there! Due to the narrow lanes and lack of parking in the immediate vicinity of Frith Wood, it is recommended that walkers leave vehicles in one of the many public car parks in Ledbury Town.

Alternatively, for those coming from further away, we would encourage arriving by train. Ledbury station is well served by trains on the Hereford-Worcester line (please contact national Rail Enquires on 08457 484950 or visit www.nationalrail.co.uk for times). You can start the walk directly from the train station itself (see below for route description) without adding to the length of the walk. In using the train you will also be helping to conserve the tranquillity of this beautiful area.

The walk is approximately 6km (4 miles) in length, measured from Ledbury Market Hall and back. There are some steep climbs and descents although these tend to be fairly short. Some of the route will be muddy and slippery even on dry days.

From Ledbury town centre - Leave the High Street on the corner by the Market House and follow Church Street. Continue along Church Street, past Upperhall Close, and as the road bends sharply to the left, take the Green Lane footpath (ZB13). Follow this up a short incline and along the western boundary of Dog Hill Wood, follow the footpath sign, which leads into 'Upperfields' and continue along this road until Knapp Lane is reached. Cross diagonally over Knapp Lane following the footpath sign towards Frith Wood. ***Please take care when crossing Knapp Lane, it may be narrow but it is often busy.***

From Ledbury railway station - Leave the station and proceed down the access road to The Homend (the main street through Ledbury). Turn right and follow the road away from Ledbury Town centre. Continue onto the Bromyard Road (B4214) and under the railway bridge. Take the footpath (ZB19) on the right hand side of the road, which is about 30m beyond the railway bridge. This joins the following described route at the back of 'Frith Wood House'.

The Route

The following route has been specifically designed in order to introduce members of the public to some of the features, flora and fauna mentioned within this booklet. Along the route there are ten points of interest that are on or visible from the route. These are numbered in the text and on the map. In addition to these, there are a number of viewpoints that can be reached by making short detours from the route. These are also marked on the map.

Please remember that some of the flora and fauna referred to in the text are seasonal and therefore will not be visible all year round. Equally, as the groundcover rises and the tree canopy opens, throughout the spring and summer months, some of the archaeological features may become obscured.

The track into Frith Wood leaves Knapp Lane, opposite 'Upperfields', passing 'Tunnel Cottage' on the right. Below and to the left is Ledbury railway station and the entrance to the railway tunnel. The track crosses an incline, which was constructed to transport stone used in the building of the railway in 1861 from a large quarry close to the right hand side of the track. A little further on is an old hollow way that runs off the track to the right and curves around the back of 'Frith Wood House' and rejoins the track just to the north of 'Little Frith'. On the left hand side of the track, just before 'Frith Wood House' is a gate that leads on to part of 'The Herefordshire Way'. ***Please do not follow the track through the garden of 'Frith Wood House', as this is a private road and not a public right of way*.**

Follow the footpath out into the field, and continue northwards crossing the garden of 'Little Frith'. Go into the field and follow the boundary of 'Little Frith' until a gate into Frith Wood is reached. Go through the gate and up onto the Forestry Commission track. The Forestry Commission created this track around Frith Wood when they purchased the wood in 1959.

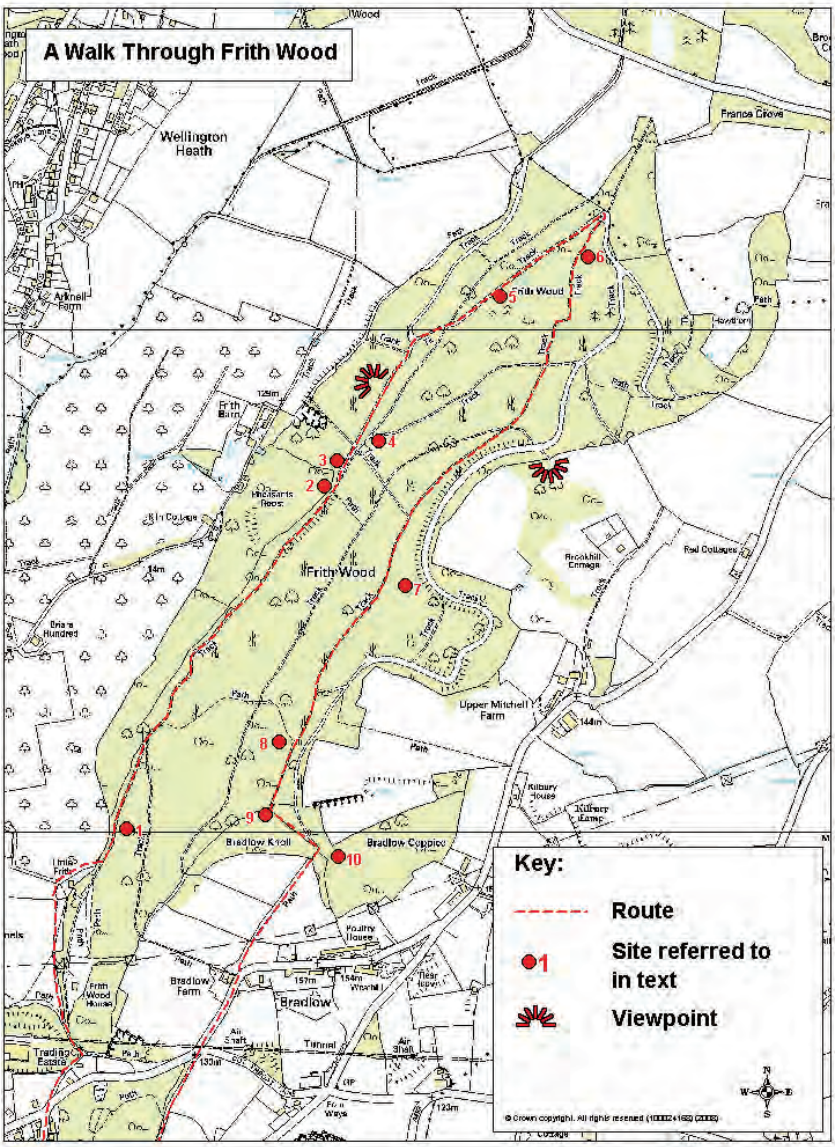
On the right hand side of the track is an area of strip lynchets (Medieval fields) **(1)**. These are described in more detail on page 15.

Due to the width of the track, more light is let in and as a consequence a wide variety of flora can be seen to either side including Wood Anemone, Primrose, Bugle, Yellow Archangel, Violets, and Bluebell.

The track continues to head north, rising gently for just under 1km (0.5 miles) until it reaches a turning area. Just before the turning area, close to the left hand side of the track a large pollarded Small-Leaved Lime tree can be seen **(2)**. This is growing out of the top of the late medieval woodland boundary bank **(3)**, which marked the western edge of the wood from at least the 15th century up to the 18th century (see plan on page 16). The west-facing slope of Frith Wood contains a number of well-preserved charcoal-burning platforms **(4)**. There is a good view towards Wellington Heath along this section of the track.

Continue along the track for another 100m and take the right hand fork (Godwin's Rise). This runs diagonally up the slope to the end of the ridge. Here there are outcrops of limestone and siltstone. Fossils of shells and other marine life can be found in the loose rocks at the base of the slope **(5)**. At the top of the ridge there is a junction between Godwin's Rise walk, which continues to the east and a public footpath (CW56) that runs from the Petty France road along the ridge top. At this junction turn right onto the footpath and follow the crest of the ridge. On the left hand side of the path is a large bank and ditch **(6)**. This feature follows the top of the ridge up to Bradlow Knoll. It is thought that this bank and ditch formed part of a boundary for a late prehistoric or Roman estate.

As the footpath rises, the ridge becomes narrower with the eastern side of the ridge becoming very steep. This slope has traditionally been used for Chestnut coppice **(7)**. This has resulted in the huge coppice stools that can be seen today. A little further along the ridge, on the western (right hand) side of the path is a roughly level


A Walk Through Frith Wood
Wellington Heath
Frith Wood
Bradlow Knoll
Bradlow Coppice
Bradlow
Upper Mitchell Farm
Key:
Route
Site referred to in text
Viewpoint

“Exploring Frith Wood” is the result of a community project that brought together individuals and groups with a variety of interests in archaeology, history, ecology, geology and forestry. The booklet aims to introduce the reader to the varied character of our landscape and the processes that have shaped them.

The project was made possible by a grant from the Malvern Hills AONB Sustainable Development Fund.

Forestry Commission England

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty MALVERN HILLS

VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY

Herefordshire & Worcestershire EARTH HERITAGE TRUST

ENGLAND'S PAST FOR EVERYONE