

= Leigh Woods National Nature Reserve =

Leigh Woods is a 2 @-@ square @-@ kilometre ( 0 @.@ 77 sq mi ) area of woodland on the south @-@ west side of the Avon Gorge , close to the Clifton Suspension Bridge , within North Somerset opposite the English city of Bristol and north of the Ashton Court estate , of which it formed a part . Stokeleigh Camp , a hillfort thought to have been occupied from the third century BC to the first century AD and possibly also in the Middle Ages , lies within the reserve on the edge of the Nightingale Valley . On the bank of the Avon , within the reserve , are quarries for limestone and celestine which were worked in the 18th and 19th centuries are now derelict .

In 1909 part of the woodland was donated to the National Trust by George Alfred Wills , to prevent development of the city beside the gorge following the building of the Leigh Woods suburb . Areas not owned by the National Trust have since been taken over by the Forestry Commission . Rare trees include multiple species of *Sorbus* with at least nine native and four imported species . Bristol rockcress ( *Arabis scabra* ) which is unique to the Avon Gorge can be seen flowering in April ; various species of orchids and western spiked speedwell ( *Veronica spicata* ) are common in June and July . It is a national nature reserve and is included in the Avon Gorge Site of Special Scientific Interest ,

= = Topography = =

The woods , which cover an area of 2 square kilometres ( 0 @.@ 77 sq mi ) , are on a ridge which mainly consists of limestone , with some sandstone which runs from Clifton to Clevedon , 10 miles ( 16 km ) away on the Bristol Channel coast . At the southern end of the woods is Nightingale Valley ( one of several thus named in the area ) , a dry valley which is cut into the side of the gorge . Its area slopes from the highest point nearly opposite the north gate of Ashton Court to the River Avon beside the western buttress of the Clifton Suspension Bridge . The woods are on the Monarch 's Way long @-@ distance footpath .

= = History = =

Within Leigh Woods is Stokeleigh Camp , a hill fort thought to have been occupied from the third century BC to the first century AD and also in the Middle Ages . It is situated on a promontory , bounding the north flank of the Nightingale Valley and occupying around 7 @.@ 5 acres ( 3 @.@ 0 ha ) . Stokeleigh Camp is thought to have been occupied from the late pre @-@ Roman Iron Age , when it was in the area controlled by the Dobunni . Archaeological investigations suggest during the 1st century Belgae tribes may have been present with some of the pottery showing the influence of the Durotriges . There may have been a break in occupation before reuse in the middle to late 2nd century . In addition to the pottery recovered a possible coin of Gallienus dating from his reign between 253 and 268 has been recovered . An iron @-@ involuted brooch of the La Tène II type has also been found . It is unclear whether the occupation of Stokeleigh Camp in the 3rd century was for a formal garrison or whether it was just used by " squatters " or as a place of refuge in times of crisis . Stokeleigh might have been connected with the Wansdyke , a series of defensive linear earthworks , consisting of a ditch and an embankment running at least from Maes Knoll in Somerset , to the Savernake Forest near Marlborough in Wiltshire , however there is little evidence for this . It is also possible that the site was occupied in the Middle Ages .

North of Stokeleigh Camp are a series of limestone and mineral quarries , overlooking the River Avon , which are now disused . In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this had an important celestine quarry and a tramway which linked it to a dock on the Avon ; both are now derelict . The area has in recent years been restored as an arboretum . At the northern end of the woods is Paradise Bottom . This is included in the Leigh Court Estate and was part of the ground laid out by Humphry Repton for Philip John Miles . Some of the first plantings of the giant redwood ( *Sequoiadendron giganteum* ) and the Weymouth pine ( *Pinus strobus* ) , among other " exotics " imported to the UK , were made here by Sir William Miles in the 1860s .

To the south of the woods is an affluent suburb of Bristol also known as Leigh Woods . It is situated at the western end of the Clifton Suspension Bridge , which opened in 1864 , making the development of Leigh Woods as an upmarket residential area practicable . Houses in varying styles were built from the mid @-@ 1860s until the First World War .

In 1857 the mutilated body of a murdered woman was found in Nightingale Valley ; the following year , John Beale was hanged at Taunton for the crime in January 1858 . Another violent death occurred in 1948 when George Henry Chinnock , who had been living in the woods , was found with head injuries .

In 1909 part of the woodland was donated to the National Trust by the tobacco company owner George Alfred Wills . He did this to prevent housing development on the western side of the gorge as Bristol grew in size and population . Areas not owned by the National Trust have since been taken over by the Forestry Commission .

The Portishead Railway runs close to the river at the bottom of the woods . It was opened on 18 April 1867 , but closed on 3 April 1981 . The Great Western Railway built a small station with the aim of attracting tourists to the area ; Nightingale Valley Halt was not very successful and was only in use for less than five years , from 9 July 1928 until 12 September 1932 . The line was reopened for freight traffic as far as Royal Portbury Dock on 21 December 2001 and local councils are proposing to reintroduce a passenger service to Portishead as part of their MetroWest plans , although this would not happen before 2019 .

In 1957 a Filton @-@ based RAF Vampire jet from 501 Squadron crashed into Leigh Woods . The pilot , Flying officer John Greenwood , was killed after he flew under the deck of the suspension bridge while performing a victory roll .

Small mountain biking circuits are present in the woods and the area is a popular walking area for Bristolians .

= = Flora and fauna = =

Because of the rare flora and fauna , the woods have been included in the Avon Gorge Site of Special Scientific Interest , which received the designation in 1952 , and 140 hectares ( 350 acres ) has been designated as a national nature reserve .

The south part of the woods is an area of former pasture woodland with old pollards , mainly oak and some small @-@ leaved lime . To the north , the area comprises ancient woodland of old coppice with standards and contains a rich variety of trees . Rare trees include Bristol whitebeam ( *Sorbus bristoliensis* ) and wild service tree ( *Sorbus torminalis* ) . There are multiple species of *Sorbus* within the woods with at least nine native and four imported species , making it one of the most important sites in Britain for this tree . Birds which live in the woods include the raven ( *Corvus* ) and peregrine falcon ( *Falco peregrinus* ) . Many butterflies and moths can be seen in summer including the white @-@ letter hairstreak ( *Satyrus w @-@ album* ) .

On the steep grassy slopes above the River Avon , Bristol rockcress ( *Arabis scabra* ) which is unique to the Avon Gorge can be seen flowering in April ; orchids and western spiked speedwell ( *Veronica spicata* ) are common in June and July . In autumn the woodland hosts over 300 species of fungi . Bilberry , a scarce plant in the Bristol area , is found in Leigh Woods , as is the parasitic plant yellow bird 's @-@ nest ( *Monotropa hypopitys* ) . Lady orchid ( *Orchis purpurea* ) was discovered here in 1990 , in Nightingale Valley ; there is doubt as to whether this was a wild plant or an introduction . Green @-@ flowered Helleborine ( *Epipactis phyllanthos* ) is found on the western side of the gorge , in a wooded area next to the towpath below Leigh Woods .