



## Friends of Ryebank Fields COMMUNITY WALKS

### A Self-Guided Walk for Ryebank Fields

#### LOCATION

Ryebank Fields is in Chorlton (Manchester) but is bordered on two sides by Stretford (Trafford).

First of all get your bearings... as you enter Ryebank Fields, from Longford Road in Chorlton, M21 9WW (standing with your back to the road), straight ahead is North looking towards Firwood; to your right St. John's School is to the East; to your left is Longford Park to the West and behind you towards Edge Lane is South. Our circular walk starts here but you can also enter Ryebank Fields from the Trafford side, at the end of Ryebank Road, post code M16 0HB, and start the walk at Point 6.

#### HISTORY

Much of the information that follows is based on the memories of local people and is true to the best of our knowledge.

- The area was once part of the Forest of Arden, an extensive area of woodland, on either side of the River Mersey, which consisted mainly of Oak and Willow.
- It's likely that it later became arable land and possibly formed part of Firs Farm, in Firwood, which was located where St. Hilda's School is today.
- Later it is believed to have been part of the Longford Estate. The hall and park were created in 1857 by John Rylands.

- The land lies on a deposit of boulder clay and around the late 1800s/early 1900s it became clay pits for Jackson's Brickworks, which stood where St. John's School is now.
- The brickworks closed in the 1930's and the pits were abandoned and filled with rain water. They became a giant adventure playground and children would sail make-shift rafts across them. They were at least 40 feet deep and stretched across both fields.
- Sadly a child drowned in one of the pits and the Council decided to fill them in and the area subsequently became an unregistered tip.
- In the early '70s the land was reclaimed by the City Council's Parks Department under Operation Eyesore.
- The land was then gifted to Manchester Polytechnic as sports fields. Local people remember that this was done under covenant for use for sports and recreational purposes only but MCC are unable to find any record of this.
- The land was then formally transferred to Manchester Metropolitan University in 1992 as a result of the Education Reform Act.
- In 1996 MMU moved their sports facilities to Carrington and abandoned Ryebank Fields. They submitted an unsuccessful planning application (which went to appeal) for 90 homes.
- In the mid 2000s local people submitted an unsuccessful Village Green application for the land.
- In 2017 MMU produced a Development Framework with proposals to build 70 executive homes on Ryebank Fields. This was subsequently increased to 120 mixed tenure homes and this latter



Development Framework was formally adopted by MCC in June 2019.

THE FRIENDS OF RYEBANK FIELDS ARE DETERMINED TO FIGHT THIS DEVELOPMENT: Ryebank Fields is a GREENFIELD site and both national and local planning policy dictates a brownfield first approach. Local people have been caretakers of this land since MMU abandoned it over 20 years ago. It is a naturally biodiverse and re-wilded wildlife haven; a much loved and well used community asset. Please enjoy your walk today in this special place.

Please take care as you go as paths may be muddy and uneven.

### 1.

As you enter the fields look East towards St. John's School. The school was once the site of Jackson's Brickworks and its huge chimney was said to terrify local children. The production of bricks in Manchester was dominated by two families: the Jacksons and the Harrisons, and their operations were eventually merged after Elizabeth Harrison, the eldest daughter of Walter Harrison, married Joseph Jackson, son of the late Thomas Jackson, in 1904. In its heyday Jackson's Brickworks had sites across Manchester and Stockport, even branching out as far as Merseyside and Derbyshire. They mainly made bricks for internal walls and it is likely that the bricks within your house were produced from clay from these fields. The bricks were originally transported by a fleet of Foden





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steam wagons and in the Summer clouds of brick dust would settle on front door steps and window sills as they rattled by.

The hard standing area you find yourself on was once the car park for the Polytechnic playing fields. To your left towards the boundary with Longford Park was an all weather pitch with floodlights and at the end of the tarmac path there was a small building that was used as changing rooms. The rugby pitch was directly ahead of you on the Southern field; two football pitches used to occupy the Northern field with a long jump and discus area in the North West corner. According to MMU the pitches became unusable due to all kinds of rubble coming to the surface and severe water-logging in the Southern Field.

We know the land was formerly an unregistered tip and people living close by remember some of the things that are said to have been dumped here. These include drums of oil and paint; asbestos sheeting from old Anderson shelters and garages and rubble from the excavations for the Manchester Arndale Centre. Neighbours remember a whole tipper-truck falling into one of the pits; the driver apparently jumped to safety just in time; the truck is still there. There are also reports of the MOD burying radios here after the war; it is said that they arrived with an armed guard. All manner of rubbish and waste was deposited here including coal ash from the brick kilns and there are even rumours of a small plane being buried within the landfill. It is amazing how nature has now reclaimed this former wasteland and we know that the land is only toxic if it is disturbed.

As you walk into the Fields turn right and head East towards the boundary with St. John's School.

### 2.

One of the major issues with the land at Ryebank Fields is severe water-logging, as the area sits on a natural deposit of boulder clay which restricts drainage. This is most apparent here in the Southern Field. The cellars of surrounding properties are often flooded, to the extent that United Utilities have given pumps to affected residents. Historically the whole area around Ryebank, Longford, Newport and Nicholas roads used to be known as 'The Isles.' It was the location of a series of streams and pools that may have been tributaries to the River Mersey. Longford Brook is still culverted beneath the Northern field and Black Brook used to run close to the Northern perimeter.

As a result of the marshy conditions, the Southern Field was the most adversely effected by MMU's site investigations, which took place in early December 2019. Their machines left huge ruts and surface water remained making the area even more soggy and water-logged. To turn a negative into a positive our local community came together to plant over 300 daffodil bulbs in the riven ground. Daffodils represent regeneration and new life and we look forward to seeing our **Bulbs of Hope** bloom in Spring for many years to come.



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As you look around the Southern field, note the number of young Oak trees. Our **Millennium Oaks** were planted by Steve, a local resident who, after MMU's last attempt to build in the late '90s, was encouraged to plant trees, in the year 2000, to combat global warming. He used to walk his dogs twice a day on Ryebank Fields and thought he could kill two birds with one stone by locking-up carbon dioxide and making the Fields less attractive to a developer by populating it with Oak trees. He collected acorns from several trees around Chorlton (to keep some genetic diversity) and planted a few every time he went for a walk. Now, twenty years later, the trees that came up in the first year are quite a respectable size and more come up every year. We have counted around 150 across the two Fields. The trees were positioned to complement the existing terrain and flora and to avoid encroaching on the gardens of current residents. Steve chose oak because of its longevity, its ability to grow to a large size and its iconic Englishness.

A single Oak tree sustains over 280 types of insects which in turn attract birds and wildlife and promote natural biodiversity. Acorns were traditionally used as food and fodder for animals and Oaks are said to have restorative and medicinal qualities so just walking amongst these trees should give you a sense of well being.

It's said that Oak trees were worshipped by the Druids, with 'Duir' being the ancient word for Oak. We've all heard of the Royal Oak which derives from when King Charles II hid in an Oak tree to escape the Roundheads at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. It's true that Oaks are steeped in history and as you follow the Eastern

boundary North towards the middle of the Fields you are now walking firmly in the footsteps of the Anglo-Saxons.

### 3.

Stop just before the dip in the path as you are now approaching the historic **Nico Ditch**, a 6 mile linear earthwork, which stretches across South Manchester, from Ashton Moss in the East to Moorside, another area of moss land, in Urmston, to the West. Nico Ditch dates to between 600 - 1000 AD and is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086.

The Nico Ditch marks the ancient boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. To the South you are standing in Mercia and to the North, as you cross the ditch, you will enter Northumbria. The ditch is dug in the 'U' shape typical of boundary demarcation rather than the 'V' shape used for defensive fortifications. Nico Ditch is a linear frontier akin to Offa's Dyke, which formed the Anglo Saxon boundary between England and Wales, and Hadrian's Wall, the Roman frontier between England and Scotland. Sections of the Nico Ditch at Platt Fields Park and Denton Golf Course are listed as Scheduled Ancient Monuments by Historic England, however, much of the earthwork has been lost with the ditch at Ryebank Fields possibly being the only remaining section to survive in the West.

Legend has it that the Nico Ditch was completed in a single night by the inhabitants of Manchester who stood side by side, with each





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man digging his own height, as a protection against Viking invaders who sailed up the River Mersey in 870. According to 19th century folklore, the ditch was the site of a bloody battle with the Danes which gave their names to the nearby towns of Gorton, deriving from 'gore town' and Reddish deriving from 'red ditch,' however, it's far more likely that these names mean 'dirty farmstead' and 'reedy ditch' respectively.

The name Nico possibly derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'hnickar' a water spirit who seized and drowned unwary travellers, or alternatively from 'næcan' the Anglo-Saxon verb to 'kill.' The ditch is also referred to as 'Mykelldiche' or 'magnum fossatum' meaning the 'great ditch'.

Cross over the ditch and enter the Northern Field and Northumbria, taking the path immediately to your right towards the Eastern perimeter of the Field.

### 4.

The Eastern perimeter of the Northern Field borders Peveril Crescent which was built in the '60s on land that was formerly allotments. It's notable that building went ahead there rather than on the Fields which fuels speculation that this was because the land here was deemed unfit for development due to the issues of landfill and flooding.

When the Fields were turned into sports pitches in the early '70s two methane pipes were inserted into the ground, one here behind Peveril Crescent and one further North behind Copley Road. The pipes were approximately an inch and a half in diameter and stood about 4 inches proud from the ground. They are probably still here but are likely to have been covered over the years by grass and leaves.

One of the large trees adjacent to the houses is a mature apple tree and close by you will also see some younger fruit trees. This is our **Community Orchard**. The original trees were planted by Joe, who lived on Peveril Crescent, and started the orchard, around 5 years ago, when he planted apple and cherry trees on the Fields, to the rear of his garden, so that people passing by could help themselves to the fruit. His neighbours and friends have since continued to look after these trees on his behalf and we have continued his legacy by planting more trees in his memory.

The path you have walked so far has been bordered by a multitude of blackberry bushes which are abundant in this area too. As well as being a great food source for insects and wildlife, the Fields present wonderful foraging opportunities for the local community; you'll also find wild raspberries, pineapple weed/wild chamomile (which can be dried and used for tea or is great steeped in vodka); common hog weed seeds (which are like a cross between coriander and cardamom); nettles (which are amazing in soup, like a tastier version of spinach, or can be dried and used for tea); three cornered leek (also great in soups, like a stronger, garlicky version



of chives). Also edible and growing on the fields are hawthorn, ground elder, dandelion, elderflower/elderberry and much, much more. This wonderful community resource is a living food bank and we want to also introduce a plant and pick area where people can give and take as they wish. Please, however, be careful and do not pick or eat anything unless you are sure what it is and that it is safe to do so.

As you walk Northwards along the Eastern boundary between the houses of Peveril Crescent and Copley Road, close to a single storey garage block, you will cross over the culverted Longford Brook which flows beneath the Fields. Notice how, as you continue Northwards, the ground occupied by the older houses on Copley Road is much lower than Peveril Crescent. Here there is a 2-3 metre drop down from the Fields and the landfill in the former clay pits is said to be only 6 feet away from the gardens of these properties.

## 5.

The hedgerow along the Eastern perimeter to the rear of Copley Road is mainly Hawthorn, and is thought to pre-date the Enclosures of the 18th Century, so may be an Ancient Hedgerow. The line of trees along the Northern perimeter of the Fields, behind Park Square, marks the municipal boundary between Manchester and Trafford. Further investigation is required to determine if there is hedgerow along this borderline but, if so, it may be classed as an Important Hedgerow.

It is interesting to note that the Manchester/Trafford boundary runs parallel to the Nico Ditch. This is consistent across other areas of Manchester. Often linear boundaries would cover a wide area e.g. Hadrian's Wall consisted of the wall, a ditch or 'vallum' and the 'Stanegate,' a Roman road that linked the forts and villages along the wall. It is possible therefore that the whole of the Northern field could have been part of a wider boundary feature.

The municipal boundary extends from the North East corner of the Fields across one end of Great Stone Road. Here two 'stones' are marked on old ordnance maps on either side of the road. We have located one of these stones on land owned by United Utilities on the Eastern side of the road and we are working to authenticate this stone and hopefully find the other one which, if it still exists, may be in the garden of a nearby house. The stones may be boundary stones and may have marked the meeting point of three boundaries ~ also known as a 'Trifinium' ~ as there was a former boundary between Stretford and Trafford running East from Chester Road.

It's also interesting to note that the other end of Great Stone Road, where it meets Chester Road (the old Roman Road between Manchester and Chester), was the original location of the Great Stone, which is listed with Historic England. The Great Stone has two hollows or wells in its surface and it is most likely to have been the base of an Anglo-Saxon cross shaft. It is also said that it could have been a plague stone and that travellers, who had to pay a toll to enter Manchester, would first dip their coins into one well that



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was filled with vinegar and then into the other that was filled with Holy water to ensure it didn't carry the plague. Another legend states that the Roman giant, Tarquin, threw the Great Stone from the ramparts of the Roman fort at Castlefield, in Manchester, and in so doing the hollows in its surface were made by his finger and thumb. It is also said that the Great Stone is slowly sinking and when it finally sinks forever it will determine the end of the world. The Great Stone was moved when the road was widened but can still be seen, a short distance away from its original location, at the Chester Road entrance to Gorse Hill Park.

The **Aspen Grove** at the centre of the Northern perimeter is one of the most beautiful features of Ryebank Fields. The path through the centre has been maintained by local people over the years as the grove of trees has grown and expanded.

Aspen derives from the Greek word 'aspis' meaning 'shield' which was one of the many traditional uses of its wood. The Latin name for the tree is *Populus tremula* or *Populus tremuloides*, otherwise known as quaking Aspen due to the way its leaves tremble and shake in the wind. This is due to the fact that one side of the leaf stem is flattened. It is said to be the most restless and fidgety of trees. Its leaves make a watery and fluid sound as they move which can often be mistaken for rain or running water. The poem 'Summer Images' by John Clare talks about a shepherd boy running for shelter from the rain, having been deceived by the wind in the Aspen leaves.

The leaves turn a vibrant gold in Autumn and a crown made of Aspen leaves was said to give its wearer the power to visit and return safely from the Underworld.

In Celtic mythology, the visual effect of an Aspen trembling in the wind was said to be the tree communicating between this world and the next.

Before you enter the wood, have a think about how many trees there might be. You may be surprised to learn that there could be just one! This is due to the rhizomatic nature of their root systems. Aspens grow in clonal colonies, derived from a single seedling, and spread by means of root suckers. Each tree within a clone has an identical genetic profile. An individual Aspen tree can live up to 150 years above ground but the root system can endure for thousands of years so Aspen is considered to be an indicator of ancient woodlands.

Walk through the wood and stop on the other side at the Trafford entrance to the Fields.

### 6.

The houses whose gardens back on to the Northern side of the Fields are in Park Square Trafford. This was the site of a bomb blast during World War 2, and is plotted on bomb maps for Manchester. Stained glass windows in the doors of neighbouring properties on Copley Road (to the East) were sucked either inwards or outwards by the circular force of the blast and shrapnel was embedded in



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rooftops. The next recorded blast point was on Newport Road in Chorlton so it follows that the bombs were dropped across Ryebank Fields. As at the time of the raids, the Fields was abandoned clay pits filled with water, there is speculation as to whether unexploded bombs could still exist below the ground and the site is classified as a medium to high risk unexploded ordnance area. There have been localised tremors in the vicinity; the most recent being on Boxing Day 2017 but whether this has anything to do with such speculation is unknown.

The target for the bombs was the Thirlmere Aqueduct which runs directly along the Northern perimeter of the Fields below where you are standing. The Aqueduct is a 96 mile-long water supply system that carries water to Manchester from the Thirlmere Reservoir in the Lake District. It was built to carry approximately 55,000,000 imperial gallons per day and is the longest gravity-fed aqueduct in the country, with no pumps along its route. The water flows at a speed of 4 miles per hour and takes just over a day to reach the city, flowing as far as Heaton Park Reservoir in Prestwich.

You are now standing at the end of Ryebank Road in Firwood. MMU's development plans include opening up this side of the Fields to traffic. There is no established vehicular access here and local residents are vehemently opposed to these proposals which would destroy their cul-de-sac community. They have the full support of their local Councillors and Trafford Council. If you step out to the end of the road you will see the Trafford Ryebank

Residents' Community Garden which has been sponsored by Trafford Council.

It is often said that Ryebank Road was intended to be a through road as the house numbers are sequential on either side of the Fields. This is untrue as the houses on each side were originally numbered as two separate roads and this was later changed in 1926. It is, however, likely that the two roads were named after the same geographical feature.

The origins of place names can give us many clues to the past so it's interesting to take a closer look at the etymology of the area. Looking at the road names: 'Ryebank' derives from either 'rye' the crop or grass or possibly from 'rie' which is an old form of 'river' and 'bank' could refer to the bank of a river or stream or possibly the bank of the Nico Ditch. 'Longford' easily translates as a long ford or 'shallow crossing place'.

We know that Ryebank Road lies on both sides of the fields which were once part of the Longford estate which was a much larger area than the current park. There is another Longford Road on the Western side of the park which meets Chester Road adjacent to Longford Bridge which is the point where Longford Brook enters the Bridgewater Canal. It is therefore possible that the 'long' 'ford' stretched as far as this point.

'Stretford' dates back to Roman times. The name derives from 'stræt' meaning 'street' and 'ford' meaning 'shallow crossing place'





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as the parish grew up around the crossing point of the River Mersey (where Crossford Bridge is now) on the old Roman Road from Chester to Manchester, i.e. the A56 Chester Road.

'Chorlton' is Anglo-Saxon in origin and the first settlement here dates back to somewhere between 600 - 1000 AD. The name derives from 'ceorl' meaning 'countryman' or 'peasant' and 'ton' which is a suffix meaning 'farmstead' or 'clearing' that can be seen in many place names of the time, e.g. Ashton, Denton, Urmston. It's also worth noting that other villages along the length of the Nico Ditch have Anglo-Saxon names e.g. Levenshulme and Davyhulme; the suffix 'hulme' comes from the Old Saxon 'holmr' meaning 'island' or 'raised land in a marsh.'

There were four areas within the township of Chorlton: these are Chorlton, Hardy, Martledge and Hough End. Interestingly Ryebank Fields is in 'Martledge' a name which derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'mæ'r' meaning boundary and 'læc' meaning 'lake', 'loch' or 'leach'. This obviously has links to the Nico Ditch and municipal boundary and the area once being known as 'The Isles'. The name of the River 'Mersey' can also be traced to mean boundary from 'mæ'r' and river from 'ea' meaning 'running water' or 'ees'.

Follow the old perimeter path into the trees towards the Western boundary with Longford Park, then turn Southwards. The old perimeter path becomes lost, it has been overgrown with brambles which form an important wildlife habitat, and you will meet the central path again on your way back. Just before the Nico Ditch

take the path to your right which links back to the old perimeter path again.

### 7.

Along the Western perimeter where the Fields meet Longford Park you can still see the mounding that was installed around the Fields at all entry points, by MMU in 2007, in an unsuccessful attempt to keep local people out.

Here you again cross the Nico Ditch and notice that it becomes lost to the West in Longford Park. The brush and brambles along the ditch in the centre of the Fields (which were destroyed during MMU's site investigations) formed an important wildlife corridor which we hope will again be regenerated by nature.

Ryebank Fields is home to a diverse array of wildlife including bats, foxes, hedgehogs, squirrels, voles, rare moths, butterflies, various types of bees, crickets, damselflies and more. The most unusual animal that has been seen here is a Muntjac deer. Over 70 species of birds have been recorded on the Fields, including our resident Sparrowhawks whose nest can be seen in the trees above you. For a full list of birds please see:

<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L6860096/media?>

We've already touched on some of the fauna on the Fields which is home to a variety of grasses including Yorkshire Fog, Red Fescue and Crested Dogstail. The grasses grow so tall in the Summer that



you can feel like a child again. The Northern Field also boasts a glorious covering of Rosebay willowherb amongst which children run and play hide and seek. We have rare spring fungi; orchids which enjoy the marshy conditions of the Southern Field, attracting bees with their vibrant colours, and rare English bluebells whose flowers fall to one side so that they hang their heads, unlike the now more common Spanish variety which stands upright with its flowers falling on either side of the stem.

We've already mentioned some of the trees here on Ryebank Fields; we have counted over 1400 in total. A tree can remove 100 gallons of water from the soil around its roots every day - a great natural defence against water-logging - most of which is then released into the air by the leaves. Each tree provides a day's supply of oxygen for up to four people and absorbs over 20 kilos of CO2 per year.

Our planet is hurtling towards climate disaster and we need to act now to stop it. One thing that is fundamental in fighting Climate Change is preserving and caring for our trees and green spaces. Manchester City Council have declared a Climate Emergency yet they have adopted a Development Framework for Ryebank Fields, which is a GREENFIELD site, and MMU purport to be the UK's 2<sup>nd</sup> greenest university.

You have now completed your walk. Please continue Southwards along the path through the Southern Field or stay awhile to enjoy this wonderful green space.

Thank you for visiting Ryebank Fields. If you have any comments or would like to add anything to our walks information please get in touch. You can email us at [ryebankfieldsfriends@gmail.com](mailto:ryebankfieldsfriends@gmail.com). Please also let us know if you would like to join our mailing list.

To find out more about our campaign and help SAVE RYEBANK FIELDS please:

- Sign our petition: <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/give-ryebank-fields-back-to-the-people>
- Join our Facebook group: <https://m.facebook.com/groups/1795200020576555>
- Follow us on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ryebankfields>
- Go to our website: <http://www.saveryebankfields.org/>