



Reconstructing Gillfield Wood's Historical Setting: Water, Wood and Wildlife

Acknowledgements

This leaflet has been funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund. It was designed by Wildtrack Publishing from material contributed by members of Friends of Gillfield Wood and Totley History Group (Kevin Walker, Chris Brewster, Josie Dunsmore, Paul Hancock, Mac Jackson, Pauline Burnett, Brian Parnell, Chris Measures); and Ian Rotherham, Paul Ardron, Simon Doncaster, Frank Spode and Barry Wright.

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About the Project

This project, organised by SYBRG with the Friends of Gillfield Wood and Sheffield Hallam University, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Its main aim is to place Gillfield Wood, an ancient woodland, the stream that flows through it and its setting into a wider historical landscape context.

- The work included:
- surveys inside the wood to investigate the remarkable dressed upright stones/ stone-posts in and around the stream, and the local geology and land-use;
 - surveys to look at the footprint of the wood, adjacent field boundaries, ancient hedgerows, trees, woodland/ wood-pasture indicators; and
 - archival research to find out more about the history of the wood, the stream and local businesses.

The 'Water' Questions: Geology, Brook and Stone-posts

The key aim of the project has been to investigate the remarkable dressed upright stones/ stone-posts found in and around the brook through the woodland. A survey of the position of the stones along the water-course has been undertaken followed by more detailed surveys of individual stone-posts, recording their precise location, and individual characteristics. The work has also involved looking at the local geology to try to find a source for the quarried stones and to work out how the brook may have changed its course over time either naturally or through human activity. The goal is to discover the history of the stoneposts - why they were put there, how they were used, by whom and when!

The Wildlife Questions: Waxcaps, Wood-pasture, Hedgerows and Shadow Woods

Surveys have been carried out to try to discover the changing footprint of the ancient woodland. They have involved recording adjacent field boundaries, ancient hedgerows, trees, and 'indicator' species such as bluebell and wild garlic as well as waxcaps and other fungi. The aim has been to gain an appreciation of the value of waxcaps and hedgerows as historic markers. This is in order to be able to interpret the landscapes and habitat management histories around Gillfield Wood to place it in its historical setting.

The History Questions

The surveys and findings were supported by archival research looking at a variety of sources. This was to try to answer questions about changes in land-use and management; demand from and supply of water for local businesses; industry and quarrying/ mining operations that could have influenced the management of the woodland and stream; and extreme or unusual weather conditions which affected the local area and may have led to the installation of water-control measures in the wood across or adjacent to the stream.

The Geology

The underlying rocks in and adjacent to the wood and its valley were formed in the Carboniferous period. The local geology is made up of layers of the softer shales, mudstone and siltstones interspersed with different sandstones (Greenmoor Rock) together with coal, ironstone and fireclays.

Key points for our project are:

- the stone-posts along the brook were quarried from the 'massive textured' layer of Greenmoor Rock;
- the layer of Greenmoor Rock in the local quarry is of the thinner, flaggy type and would have been used for walls and tilestones not for the posts;
- larger pebbles & boulders in the stream-bed are also of 'flaggy' sandstone and ganister (fireclay); and
- smaller pebbles & gravel are of mud-stone and silt-stone.

The Stone-posts

The stone-posts investigated are in and adjacent to the brook through the wood. They no longer have a function but must have done in the past because they appear to have been placed deliberately and have been worked. The detailed surveys show:

- they have notches cut into them and bolts inserted into them;
- some are in pairs, others single and a few are in groups of three;
- they may be upright, leaning over or have fallen down;
- others are now in dense undergrowth;
- whilst some are within the brook others are on what appears to be the former course.
- there are differences in design and finish which suggest that they weren't all produced at the same time.

The **three main theories** about why the stone-posts were put in are:

- regulate the flow of water to the watermills and dams to lengthen the period of operation;
- prevent flood damage to the mill, wheel and buildings downstream;
- prevent or reduce the amount of silt flowing downstream.

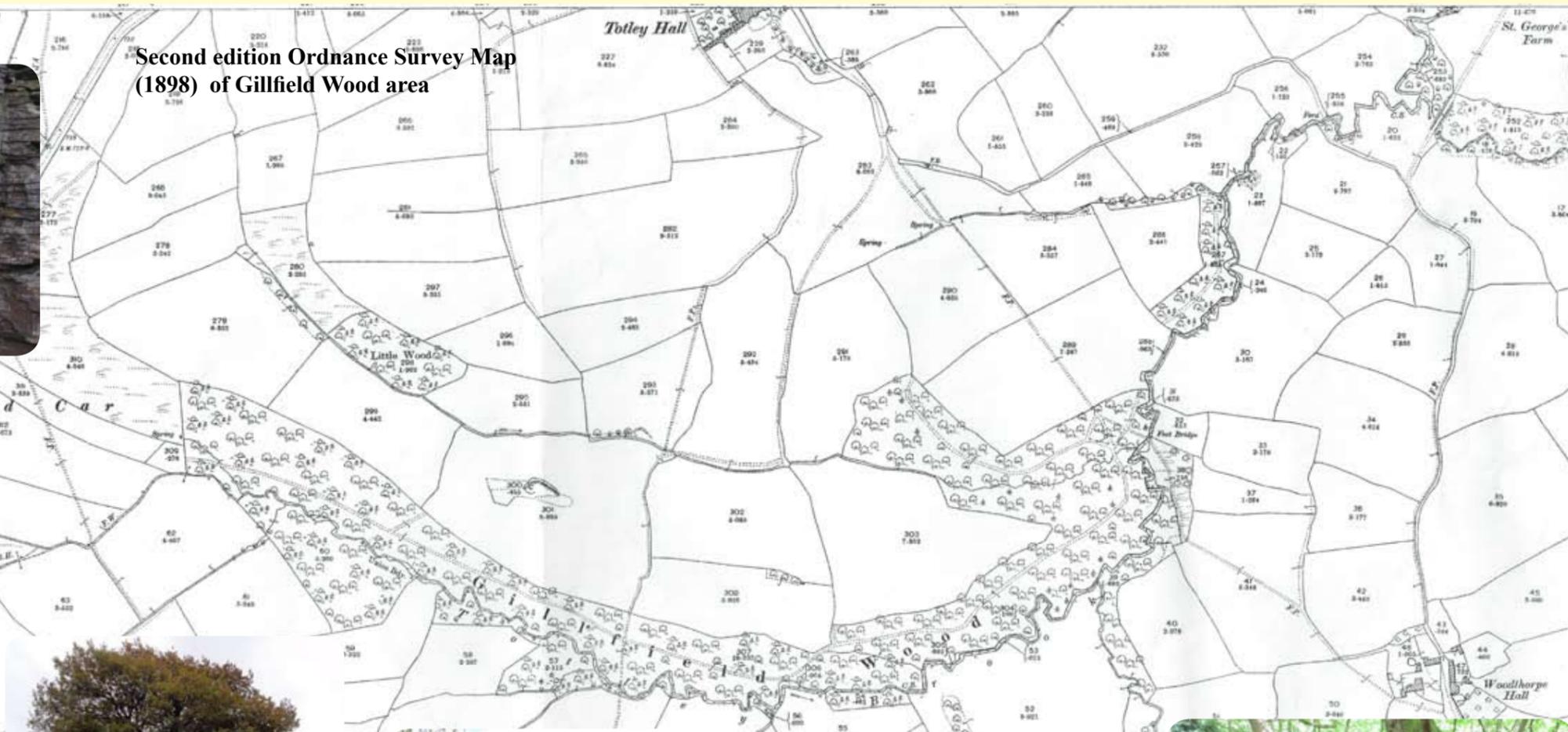
Work is ongoing to find out which of these or a combination of them are the most likely explanation!



Greenmoor Rock - example of the 'flaggy' sandstone layer.



Bluebells along former hedgerow



Second edition Ordnance Survey Map (1898) of Gillfield Wood area



Group recording a boundary oak.



Group surveying hedge.



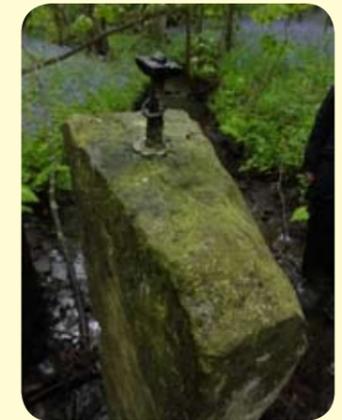
Old laid hedge of hazel.



One of the stone-posts in Totley Brook with two notches in the side.



Recording the stone-posts along Totley Brook in Gillfield Wood.



Stone-post detail showing a bolt.



Hygrocybe Coccinea (Scarlet Waxcap)

Water-wheels, Mills and Local Industry

In common with many other streams and tributaries of Sheffield rivers, Totley Brook and its neighbours were used for water power over many centuries. Totley Rolling Mill (Hall's House Smelting Mill), on Totley Brook, can be traced back to the late 16th/ early 17th centuries. It didn't cease work as a mill until the late 19th century; a period of around 300 years. In the early days it was used for lead smelting.

In 1612, 'Leonard Gill and Thomas Hall had a smelting mill at Totley called "The Wash"', prior to that there is a record of the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury paying rent to Mr Fraunces for a goit which ran across his field to the 'Earl's Totley Lead Milne' although we are not certain it is the same mill.

By the 1850s, Tyzacks of the Abbeydale Works owned the mill. And, when they sold it in 1881, to Ebenezer Hall, it had, '2 dams, a head and fall of water, grinding wheel, with 5 heavy troughs, smiths shops, warehouse, lead smelting furnace, stable and cottages'. The mill was now a small industrial complex and the regulation of water-flow would have been key to its operation.

Extreme Weather - Flooding Incidents

17th August, 1799: Great storm over and about the town. "*Rivers Dun (sic) and Sheaf, as well as brooks and streamlets, were swollen to an unusual height and overflowed their banks, inundated the houses adjoining and did considerable damage to the hay and corn fields.*" (Thomas, 1830-59, p89)

10th October, 1827: "*During the night of Wednesday 10th an immense quantity of rain fell in the neighbourhood; the rivers Don and Sheaf were swollen almost beyond precedent. Considerable damage must have been occasional along the banks of these rivers by such an unexpected flood.*" (Sheffield Independent, Oct. 16th)

1st July, 1958: "*Hundreds of people had to be moved from their homes when floods struck Sheffield in early hours of July 1st 1958. The River Sheaf burst its banks at Totley Brook, Brookfield and Heeley.*" (The Star, June 30th 1998)

Hedgerows, Trees & Woodland Indicators

Hedgerows along paths and boundaries were surveyed for their shrubs, trees and ground flora. Signs that the hedges were laid, i.e. managed to produce a stock-proof barrier were also recorded. Of particular note are some old hazel hedges that had been laid. Areas of bluebells were found away from the woodland and current hedgerows. These may give a clue to former hedgerow field boundaries. In the case of bluebell, which is a woodland indicator plant, it can also give a clue to whether historically the field was once part of a bigger Gillfield Wood. Large old standard trees, mostly of oak and ash, were recorded along the boundaries of the wood and adjacent fields. Waxcaps and their allied fungi (spindles, earth-tongues and entolomas) are indicators of old pasture and perhaps Shadow Woods. Recording sessions found that some of the fields adjacent to the wood have a good variety of waxcap and other fungi in them.