

Walk Around The Wrekin



Following the Trail

The *Walk Around The Wrekin* trail is a select guide to some of the many byways and footpaths around the Wrekin Forest – part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The trail utilises pre-existing local rights of way and designated long distance paths, passing through varied and sometimes challenging terrain. Take care at all times and remember to follow the Countryside Code: consider other people enjoying the outdoors; leave gates and property as you find them and follow paths unless wider access is available; leave no trace of your visit and take litter home; keep dogs under effective control; plan ahead and follow advice and local signs. With excellent transport links and a wide range of shops, cafes, pubs and restaurants Wellington, the historic capital of the east Shropshire district, is a great place to begin or end your journey and is an officially accredited Walkers are Welcome town. To discover more about The Wrekin and other heritage attractions in the area visit:

www.wellingtonla21.org.uk

Acknowledgements

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A guide to exploring the habitats and landscapes of the Wrekin Forest





Walk This Way

A thousand years ago, The Wrekin sat at the centre of a vast Royal hunting forest that included woodlands, farms, villages and whole towns. While that forest no longer exists, the hill is still the pinnacle of a mosaic landscape with wildwood at its heart. So come with us now and let's *Walk Around The Wrekin...*

The Royal Forest of Mount Gilbert

Although its regal origins are uncertain, it seems likely The Wrekin was enshrined as a Royal forest sometime before the Eleventh Century, perhaps by an Anglo-Saxon ruler. At that time, its boundaries were not dissimilar to the afforested areas we see today: stretching from Orleton Park, on the western outskirts of Wellington, to the tiny hamlet of Huntington in the east. However, the hill's heyday as the centre of a Royal forest did not arrive until the Normans reached Britain after their infamous conquest of 1066. In what was essentially an attempt to establish independent power bases in a time before taxation, successive monarchs sought to increase the number and extent of hunting forests, which all had their own sets of draconian rules and punishments designed



The Wrekin from the bench walks, Little Wenlock: it used to be called Mount Gilbert you know!

to protect the 'venison and vert' (defined as the wild boar, deer and their habitat). Consequently, the Wrekin Forest grew to a massive 120 square miles by the Twelfth Century, ushering in an era of overwhelming unpopularity as numerous farms, villages and towns bearing no woodland cover at all were forced to pay their dues to the Crown. If that were not enough, the Norman rebranding even extended to the naming of the hill itself, which was rechristened Mount Gilbert – in honour of a local hermit!

In the Crown's Arboreal Clutches

While your average Royal forest might have seemed like a place of deep foreboding where only the hardiest of footpads and scurrilous rogues might linger, in practice it was anything but – the Crown's constant need for money ensured all manner of illegal practices were licensed (from building houses to woodland clearance). Sadly, the abuses of the overzealous forest officials whose job it was to collect the tolls became so widespread that special measures curtailing their 'evil customs' were eventually enshrined in the Magna Carta of 1215. As the Thirteenth Century wore on, more and more places managed to extricate themselves from the Crown's arboreal clutches, so that by 1300 many Royal forests existed in little more than name only.

The Gathering Storm

The Royal Forest of Mount Gilbert effectively ceased to exist after the 'great perambulation' of June 1300, when several officials walked its perimeters to determine their extent. In reality, many localities (including Wellington, Dawley and Hadley) had been exempted from the forest's 'regard' some 50 years earlier, and while its demise signalled the end of The Wrekin's exploitation by the Crown it did not mark a return to peace in the vale. In fact, the stripping of the hill's resources gained new momentum and its woodland cover practically disappeared by the 1600s. The gathering pace of Industrial Revolution in the east Shropshire coalfield placed even greater pressure on the area but heralded a change of management style, as trees were cut back over many generations to meet local business needs. This practice of coppicing continued well into the Twentieth Century and has left behind a landscape that is as attractive now to the bewildering array of flora and fauna that use it as it was to the monarchs and industrialists of the distant past.



Following the trail in the Ropewalk Meadow above Coalbrookdale







Wellington's Bowling Park is a great place to plan a trip to The Ercall and The Wrekin

A Book of Two Halves

Just as it did for the Normans, our guide to walking the modern day Wrekin Forest also includes a landscape of varied habitats, encapsulating wild heath and woodlands, farmland, market towns and villages. Thankfully though, it does not mark a return to the 120 square mile jaunt of medieval times! Our trail conveniently divides the Wrekin Forest into northern and southern halves, and how you choose to interpret the great divide is up to you. That said, this booklet has been designed in such a way that you can break up each section into bite size pieces or, alternatively, do the whole lot in one go. Phew! Along the way, we hope you'll discover many of the ecological features and wee beasties that make this place so remarkable.

Follow That Sign

The Walk Around The Wrekin trail follows highways, byways and footpaths shared by a range of different users. Some routes carry their own branded way markers (which you can find scattered throughout these pages) but there are also a number of common symbols in use for paths across the countryside:

-  **Footpath** (yellow): open to walkers only
-  **Bridleway** (blue): open to walkers, horse riders and cyclists
-  **Restricted byway** (plum): open to walkers, cyclists, horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles
-  **Byway open to all traffic** (red): open to all the above and motor vehicles, riders and cyclists

The Foresters Way

Our exploration of the Wrekin Forest begins in Wellington – The Wrekin’s market town. Its connections to the hill stretch back over the course of a millennium and reveal themselves in the most unusual of ways...

Wellington-Under-The Wrekin

Wellington, the historic centre of the east Shropshire district, lies just over a mile north of the Wrekin Hills. When the Norman Royal forest of Mount Gilbert was in its pomp, the most obvious connection linking the two was the local deer park, Wellington Hay, which lay between Holyhead Road (on the southern outskirts of the town) and the foothills of The Ercall. The Hay was effectively the only part of the Royal demesne to survive the great perambulation of 1300 and its existence is still commemorated today in the names of both Haygate Road and The Wickets public house – which mark the sites of former entrances into the park. Wellington’s origins as a town are among the oldest of any in Shropshire, and it is thought to have been founded about 700 AD in the location of The Green, which lies adjacent to All Saints parish church.

While we recommend that you take some time to explore its tight medieval streets and visit the bustling local market (which received its inaugural



Wellington’s ancient medieval street grid is unique in east Shropshire

Sunset on Tee Lake, Dothill Wildlife Site



Tim Preston

charter in 1244) our first official port of call lies north of the historic town centre. Walking away from The Wrekin in the opposite direction towards a modern day housing estate might seem a strange way to begin a trail bearing its name but there is method in our madness! For although it is now covered in houses, Dothill was better known until the early 1800s as the home of the hereditary wardens of the Royal forest of Mount Gilbert – whose job it was to walk the forest day and night, protecting its ‘venison and vert’.

In The Forester’s Footsteps

There are several ways to reach Dothill wildlife site from Wellington town centre but we would suggest walking up Church Street from Market Square to its junction with Vineyard Road. From there, bear left and continue past the roundabout into Springhill, turning right onto North Road. Go straight on until you reach Tern Way, turn left and head for Severn Drive – Dothill Pool should now be directly in front of you! There are several footpaths through the site that lead, in a round about way, to Tee Lake and the Beanhill Valley.



All the Way to Dothill

The Forester family appears to have started policing the Wrekin woodlands during the late Twelfth Century and was rewarded for its troubles by the Crown with 30 acres of land and a house in Wellington Hay. Although Old Hall (widely reckoned to be Wellington’s oldest building) still stands, on Holyhead Road, the Foresters vacated it around 1602 for Dothill Park, where a farmstead belonging to Wellington Manor had stood since at least 1086.

By the mid-1700s, the Foresters had made some serious home improvements, creating seven acres of formal gardens around a remodelled house. Little remains of that stately pile (the family eventually left for Willey Park, near Much Wenlock) but its ornamental pools and lakes now form the centrepiece of an extensive wildlife site that wraps itself around Wellington’s northern fringes and also encompasses the Beanhill Valley – which runs parallel to the former Market Drayton railway that carries the Silkin Way through the area. Despite its formal origins, modern day Dothill is essentially a patchwork of many habitat features: open grassland, wet woodlands, mature hedgerows, pasture and scrub all form part of the picture but it is the reserve’s wetlands that are really its crowning glory. They help create good habitat conditions for numerous plant, animal and insect species and are particularly notable for their amphibian populations...

Habitat Focus: Dothill’s Amphibious Residents

For a few weeks every year, Tee Lake plays host to one of the most significant colonies of Common toads in the Wrekin Forest area. While you might readily associate them with water, they spend most of the year in damp seclusion on dry land, returning to their ancestral pools to breed in early spring. Sadly, toads (which are much larger than the many frogs that also visit this site) are not nearly as common as their name suggests, so the existence of places like Dothill are critical to their local survival.

If you are very lucky, you may just catch sight of an even rarer amphibious resident on the reserve’s wetlands: the Great-crested newt. The largest of our native species, they tend to be found in smaller, well-connected clusters of pools, of which Dothill has several. Those with plenty of aquatic vegetation at the edge tend to be favoured, as it is here that newts (much like toads) spend most of their day under deep cover, typically venturing out at night to feed on unsuspecting invertebrates and frog tadpoles.

Tim Preston



The Scorpion fly thrives in Dothill’s extensive scrub and grassland habitat

Tim Preston



Rough pasture is one of several key habitat features on the Dothill Reserve

Tim Preston



A Common toadlet leaving Dothill Pool

In The Lands of the Wrekin People

As the lakes and pools of Dothill merge seamlessly into the mature hedgerows and rough pastures of the Beanhill Valley, so the familiar features of the farmland that characterises much of the wider Wrekin Forest begin to come into view. This is a landscape that has evolved over many centuries, developing a unique ecology very different from the wooded enclaves of the hill itself

From The Wrekin to Wreosensaete

As we've already discovered, the Wrekin Forest in its medieval heyday included far more than just woodland. Yet, while the rolling pastoral and arable landscape around the hill would also have been very much under the Crown's yoke, farming had already been going on in the area for well over two thousand years – much longer than any concept of a Royal forest had existed!

When the hillfort that sits atop The Wrekin was constructed, around 1000 BC, the lands upon which



The Wrekin from Beanhill: two thousand years ago the hill was the Cornovii kingdom's ultimate 'des res'!

Tim Preston



On the road to Wrockwardine

we are now walking belonged to the Cornovii, a Celtic tribe whose kingdom stretched from the Wirral to modern day south Shropshire. Despite their predilection for building hilltop abodes (of which The Wrekin is thought to have been their chief residence), they were a trading people whose wealth depended on tilling the land, and their farmsteads once spread far and wide across the Severn Valley.

Two Worlds Collide

When the Romans invaded the area (in 47AD) it is unclear how the Cornovii responded but they eventually abandoned The Wrekin for the invaders military camp-cum-town at Wroxeter (known thenceforth as Viroconium-Cornoviorum – Viroconium of the Cornovii). The Romans left Britain some three hundred years later, leaving the Cornovii in charge again but they eventually abandoned the site at Wroxeter around 500AD, when the settlement appears to have been engulfed by a devastating fire. Exactly what happened next has long since been lost in Dark Ages mythology but one place that looms large in the story is our next port of call: Wrockwardine – 'the enclosure by The Wrekin'. This quiet village may have been the location to which the Cornovii retreated after the great fire and the *Tribal Hidage*, a later Anglo Saxon tax record, lists the settlement as belonging to Wreosensaete, the 'people of The Wrekin'.

The Crow Road

While today's is undoubtedly a very different farmed landscape to the one our Cornovii ancestors gazed upon, an abiding sound of a modern countryside walk they would almost certainly recognise is the resonant call of a majestic crow. Like The Wrekin itself, these characterful yet unfairly maligned (and heavily persecuted) birds have endured much but survived to tell the tale. With their tendency to form large flocks, Rooks are the most conspicuous of the native crows circling our skies but their predilection for grain and grassland invertebrates means you are just as likely to see them amassed on the ground. Here, adult birds can be easily identified by the bone-coloured patch at the base of their beaks that allows them to probe deep into the soil.

Amid the throng, you will likely hear the onomatopoeic call of our smallest crow: the Jackdaw. With its piercing emerald eye and silvery nape it is not too difficult to distinguish in mixed company while, individually, its preference for hole-nesting is unique among our resident Corvids. Young, non-breeding Carrion crows also flock together in winter but adult birds are more solitary and bonded pairs defend their territories aggressively during the summer months. At this time, they can often be seen mobbing passing birds



Traversing the Wrekin Link

Taking The Wrekin Link

To take a short-cut round the edge of Wellington from Dothill you could try the Wrekin Link. To do so, leave the reserve and join the Silkin Way just north of the point where it passes beneath the Admaston Road. Head down a short flight of steps, turn left (or, to head to Admaston village and Wrockwardine, walk up the steps on the opposite side of the cutting) go under the bridge and then bear right down a narrow tarmac path. If you have journeyed correctly, you should soon arrive at a robust footbridge traversing the railway from Wellington to Shrewsbury. Cross it, turn left and follow the path that runs adjacent to the line before cutting across the edge of a rough pasture field to Wrockwardine Lane. If you plan to take this route please remember it can become very overgrown in summer – our advice: take a stick!



'Get off my land'... just kidding! Four intrepid explorers on a Wrockwardine footpath



Brave faces: the Rook's distinctive beak is specially adapted to probe the earth

and, as we approach the slopes of The Wrekin, you may witness the largest of our native crow species among their unwitting victims. To discover its identity (if you haven't guessed already) you'll need to keep reading – and walking!

Going Over The Top

When you reach the foothills of The Wrekin you can either climb over or circumvent the great hill - the choice is yours! Either way, you are bound to uncover a wealth of impressive heritage as you wander through some of the most precious habitat the Forest has to offer



On the Needle's Eye, looking south

The Wrekin Range Unfolded

The Wrekin's distinctive profile first emerged 566 million years ago during a period of intense geological upheaval but, contrary to what you may have heard, it is not a volcano, or even a mountain for that matter. However, with a drop of over 150 metres on all sides, it does qualify for something that is arguably far more prestigious: 'Marilyn' status! Devised as a punning alternative to the Munro classification system, this highly ironic nomenclature is synonymous with the pursuit of 'hill bagging' – and if you are planning to add The Wrekin to your checklist there are plenty of other wild sights to make a note of, too.

On the Shropshire Way

Whether you decided to walk the Wrekin Link or follow the road through Wrockwardine, the next stage on your eventual path to the hill involves taking the Shropshire Way. Head down the track to Sunnylands cottage and follow the sign bearing left. After walking downhill over rough pasture, you should encounter a small wooden bridge over a stream. From here, the footpath cuts across two crop fields before veering off into Woodlands Avenue. Turn right at the end of the cul-de-sac and quarter the margins of another field before taking a right turn into Powder Lane, which leads directly to Haygate Road and the entrance to Bowring Park.



Among the most spectacular, are the many raptors that glide and saw on the strong updrafts created by The Wrekin's precipitous slopes. Peregrines, Kestrels and Red Kites can all been seen above the hill but, if you were following the cliff-hanger from the last page, you'll know another avian visitor equally at home here is our largest native crow, the Northern Raven.

This acrobatic, buzzard-sized, Corvid is unmistakable in flight, not least because of the expressive range of guttural 'cronks' and 'pruks' it emits as it passes overhead. After years of persecution, Ravens are, happily, far more numerous than they once were and the rocky, tree covered crags and old quarries of the Wrekin Hills offer perfect breeding habitat for a bird capable of maintaining up to five nesting sites within a single territory.

William Nevett



The Raven: a diamond shaped tail, deeply 'fingered' wing-tips and a very large bill

Alec Connah



Common lizards have longer fingers and toes than superficially similar newt species

Hilltop Lowland Heath

When you eventually find yourself atop The Wrekin Hill, you will be gazing out on a heathland habitat that is among our scarcest and most precious ecological resources. The origins of this landscape are as old as the ramparts of the Cornovii hillfort that encircle it and speak of a time when Bronze Age settlers first began clearing and burning the land for cattle grazing – perhaps three to four thousand years ago.

Heath tends to occur on impoverished, acidic soils and where it exists below an altitude of 250 metres (which, if you'll recall its 'Marilyn' status, certainly includes The Wrekin – and parts of The Ercall and Lawrence's Hill) it is defined as Lowland Heath, rather than Moorland. Much of The Wrekin's heathland character is provided by the dwarf shrubs of Bilberry and Common heather that proliferate in these conditions, creating the vibrant late summer purple haze so typical of this setting. Look out, too, for the silvery shaking panicles of Wavy-hair grass and the tiny, pale cream flowers of scrambling Climbing corydalis, which is a local speciality in these climes!

Habitat Focus: Heathery Friends

The spartan conditions in which lowland heath flourishes might not seem a promising environment in which to watch wildlife but this is a landscape teeming with diversity. Many specialised plants, animals and insects are associated with heathland and two of the most prominent you may see on The Wrekin are the Meadow and Tree pipit. These streaky little brown birds are particularly active in springtime when males of both species deliver a 'parachuting' display flight that, as their names suggest, ends either on the ground or in a tree – which is, by far, the easiest way to tell them apart! The open, sunny expanses of heathland are also a vital habitat for reptiles and the hilltop is home to numerous Common lizards. You might find them basking in dry, exposed locations close to dense cover (where they feed on spiders and insects) but blink and you'll probably miss them as they tend to move very quickly indeed once disturbed.

William Nevett



Meadow pipit: the male's 'parachute' display can occur up to twenty times every half hour



Purple reign: Common heather is a key Wrekin heathland plant species

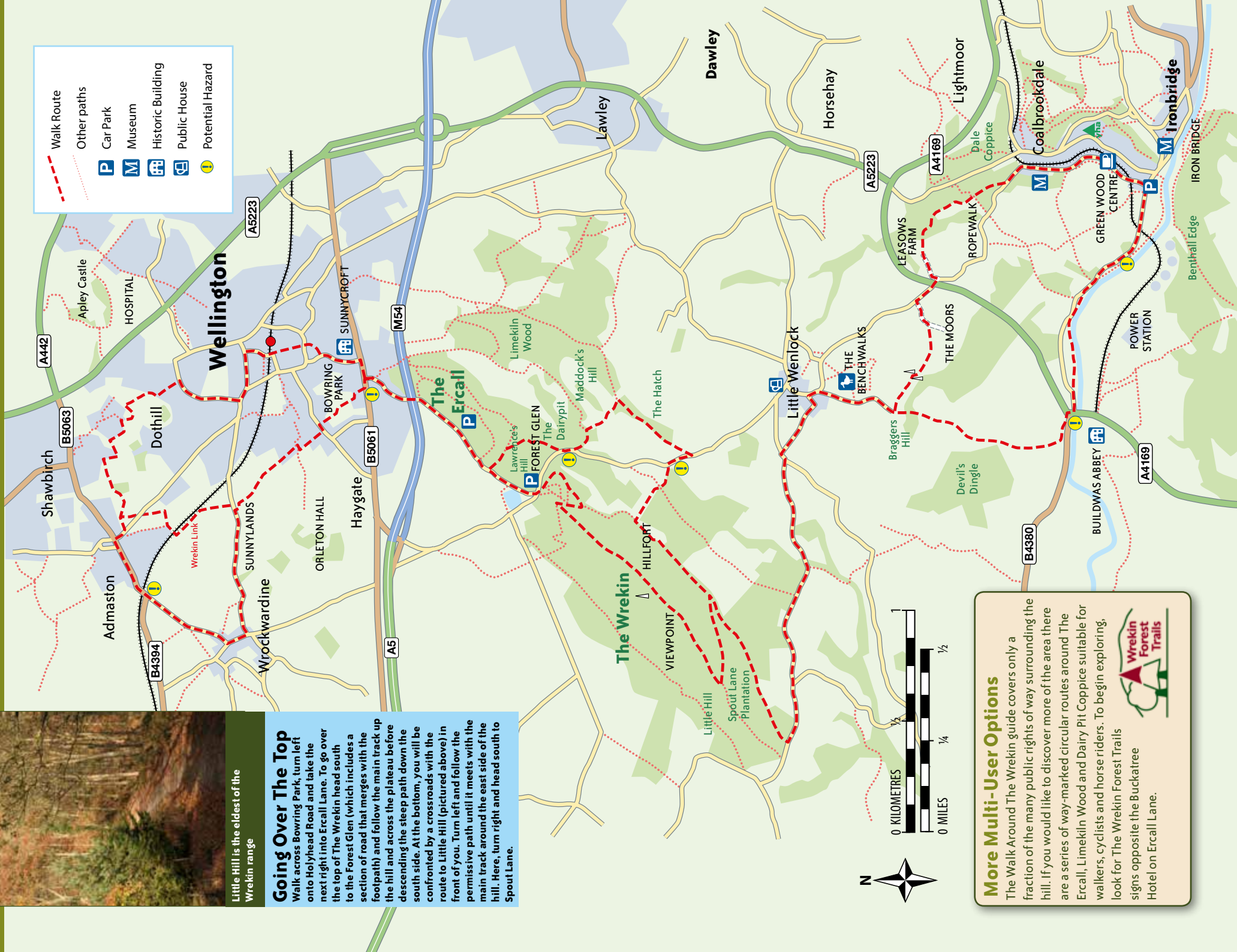
Walk Around The Wrekin



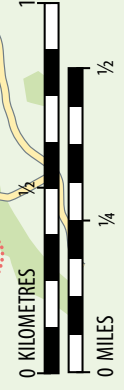
Little Hill is the eldest of the Wrekin range

Going Over The Top

Walk across Bowring Park, turn left onto Holyhead Road and take the next right into Ercall Lane. To go over the top of The Wrekin head south to the Forest Glen (which includes a section of road that merges with the footpath) and follow the main track up the hill and across the plateau before descending the steep path down the south side. At the bottom, you will be confronted by a crossroads with the route to Little Hill (pictured above) in front of you. Turn left and follow the permissive path until it meets with the main track around the east side of the hill. Here, turn right and head south to Spout Lane.



- - - Walk Route
... Other paths
P Car Park
M Museum
🏰 Historic Building
🍺 Public House
⚠️ Potential Hazard



More Multi-User Options

The Walk Around The Wrekin guide covers only a fraction of the many public rights of way surrounding the hill. If you would like to discover more of the area there are a series of way-marked circular routes around The Ercall, Limekiln Wood and Dairy Pit Coppice suitable for walkers, cyclists and horse riders. To begin exploring, look for The Wrekin Forest Trails signs opposite the Bucktree Hotel on Ercall Lane.



A Journey Through Trees

The second half of our Wrekin Forest expedition begins in the woodlands around the hill. This is a landscape with obvious links to the medieval forest of Mount Gilbert but many of the trees we see today owe their existence to more recent upheavals

Down The Hatch

Nowadays, the small yet perfectly formed village of Little Wenlock may appear a haven of pastoral charm but, less than two hundred years ago, it stood at the centre of a landscape where agriculture and heavy industry existed side by side. The reasons for this uncomfortable juxtaposition lay in the district's rich geology and, more specifically, its plentiful deposits of carboniferous limestone – a key ingredient in the iron production that put east Shropshire at the forefront of The Industrial Revolution. It seems lime extraction may have taken place in the shadow of The Wrekin as long ago as the Thirteenth Century but it appears to have increased rapidly in the late 1600s, when the Foresters (who, if you recall, were lords of the manor) began to exploit the natural resources on their estate at Steeraway, The Hatch and Oldfield, to the north-west of Little Wenlock. By the early years of the Twentieth Century, the area's

Lawrence's Hill (centre) and The Ercall from Hatch Bank



numerous commercial enterprises had all but disappeared. Yet, beneath what nature has since reclaimed, it is possible to trace signs of long vanished industrial activity. As our journey leads us past Maddocks Hill towards Hatch Bank, the footpath straddles the overgrown remnants of what was once a very significant lime working and then follows the



The lands around The Wrekin were once a hive of industrial activity – as this dubiously rendered 19th Century etching illustrates!



A landscape reclaimed: on the bench walks around Little Wenlock

trackbed of a horse-drawn wagonway that formerly carried its excavated products to the canal and ironworks at Horsehay. It formed part of a network that was among the earliest primitive railways in Britain, the lines of which can also be traced in Short Wood.

To the Manor Reborn

Wherever you are in The Wrekin Forest, the chances are you will never be too far away from a site connected to the area's industrial past. There are at least twenty disused stone quarries scattered around the slopes of the hill alone, while numerous coppiced trees and the earthen remains of countless 'coke hearths' associated with charcoal burning for the iron industry tell the story of a less visible, yet highly significant, activity that also took place here. Similarly, The Ercall and Maddock's Hill both bear visible scars of exploitation but have recovered magnificently to provide important scrub and grassland habitat for many scarce plants and insects.

You can also find similar stories of renewal unfolding in the fields around Little Wenlock, where a series of circular paths (known as the Bench Walks) weave through a landscape that was, until just a few decades ago, blighted by open cast mining. Despite its blackened past those coal seams have now been replaced by ponds, tussocky damp meadows and seasonal flushes, providing habitat that has diminished rapidly in the wider countryside. These wetland pockets are especially valuable for birds that feed on earthworms and other invertebrates active just beneath the soil. Threatened species such as Song thrush, Starling and Lapwing, are among the regular diners here while another charismatic local you might find skulking about is among our most distinctive waders...



Maddocks Hill Quarry provides good habitat for many wildflower species

Habitat Focus: Wenlock Waders

Common snipe are secretive birds that utilise damp wetland conditions to probe deep into the soil, using sensory pits at the tips of their long, flexible bills to locate worm and insect food. Typically, they feed in small groups at dusk and dawn, rarely venturing far from cover (from which they rise in a zigzagging flight when disturbed). Snipe tend to overwinter on coastal estuaries but are far more conspicuous in spring when they return to their inland breeding grounds. At this time of year, male birds can be seen trying to attract females by circling skywards, 'drumming' loudly with their outer tail feathers, then plummeting rapidly back to earth!

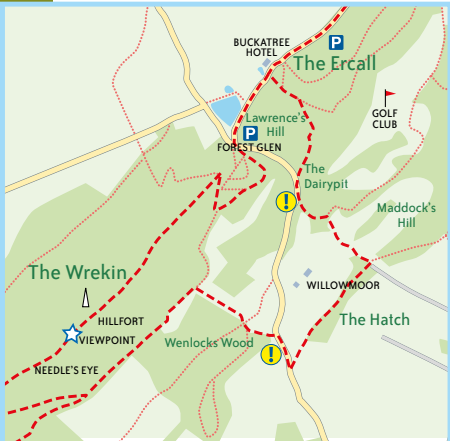
William Nevett



Common Snipe: 'this beak was made for probing...'

All Round The Wrekin

If you have decided to circumvent rather than go over the top of The Wrekin, we suggest you turn left half way up Ercall Lane (opposite the Buckatree Hotel) and visit The Ercall itself. Follow the path along the quarry floor to Dairy Pit Coppice, which will eventually lead you onto the road to Little Wenlock. After a few hundred yards, turn left again and follow the track past Maddock's Hill Quarry until you reach a crossroads. Turn right, and let the snaking path lead you along the western edge of the old lime workings towards the wide expanses of The Hatch (pictured above). At the roadside, turn right again (watching out for passing traffic!) and then left at the signposted footpath just as you begin to descend Hatch Bank. Traverse the edge of Wenlocks Wood, cross the track to Wrekin Farm, climb over a stile and head northeast across the fields to the main path around the base of The Wrekin.



Down To Devil's Dingle

As we leave Little Wenlock and the Bench Walks behind, the Wrekin Forest landscape begins to assume a very different character where deep wooded stream valleys connecting the hill to the River Severn provide a new backdrop for our journey

In the Riparian Zone

The secluded valleys that carry rainwater southwards from The Wrekin to the Severn are a vital part of the river's local ecology, exerting a direct influence on its water quality and providing linear connections that allow many species to move through the wider landscape. Several of these valleys (known locally as dingles) have been disrupted by industrial activity in the past and, as we walk downhill towards Buildwas, we pass just such an example – a section of which has been completely obliterated! However, like many other sites in the Wrekin Forest, Devil's Dingle (now rudely



Alec Connah

interrupted by a former 100 acre repository for pulverised ash fuel from Ironbridge Power Station) is recovering its wildlife value through a mixture of natural succession and manmade remodelling, which has created significant new habitat for birds, small mammals, plants and invertebrates.

Ashes to Grasses

Sadly, the dingle is currently off limits to the casual walker – although viewing is available by appointment – but an idea of its growing value to local wildlife can be gained from peering over the gate on Buildwas Lane towards the east pool (pictured above), one of three burgeoning oases of aquatic life created on the site. Bodies of open standing water like this have declined by up to 75% in Shropshire during the last century but they are certainly not the only precious ecological resource on offer at Devil's Dingle.

Beyond the east pool, you may notice some of the site's open expanses of grassland. Left undisturbed, it can provide rough, tussocky habitat for Field voles and for that reason is the hunting ground of choice for Barn owls. They are essentially farmland specialists but their favoured habitat (which is much browner in colour than typical pasture) is also far less common than it once was. On average, Barn owls take around four voles a night but their cache increases significantly when rearing young and if you see an adult carrying prey in spring or summer it will almost certainly be going to feed another hungry mouth!



Tim Preton

Cowslips (left) and Robin's Pincushion are just two sights to look out for on Buildwas Lane



William Nevett

The Weasel is smaller than the Stoat and the white edges of its coat are more irregular

Wayside Wandering

The type of rough grassland that attracts Barn owls can also be found along drainage ditches and field margins, which are particularly valuable where they exist close to hedgerows. These linear features are among the most important wildlife havens in the countryside and the widest diversity of life will often be found in older, well-established examples – such as those along Buildwas Lane. In spring, its ancient hedge banks radiate with vivid clusters of cowslips and straggling stitchworts, which are typical wildflowers of ancient byways. Many early season insects can be seen feeding here, too, but for a far stranger insight into the reciprocal relationship between hedge and invertebrate try looking along the autumnal stems of the common shrub Dog rose. If you happen to see a reddish Horse chestnut-like growth where a rosebud

should be you have probably discovered a Robin's Pincushion gall containing the overwintering larvae of a solitary, parasitic wasp (which frequent old hedge banks like these). The densely structured grasses you will find here also offer excellent habitat for Wood mice, Common shrews and Bank voles, which, in turn, attract predatory Mustelids such as Stoat and their diminutive Weasel cousins – which hunt in the burrows and runways of other small mammals. If you are very lucky you may even catch a glimpse of one or the other 'dancing'. Once upon a time, this spectacle was thought to be a mesmeric method of allowing the hunter to get closer to its quarry but it is now thought it may just be the result of a parasitic worm in the animals' nasal cavities causing pressure on the brain... oh mercy!

The Barn owl: look along a line of fence poles at dusk and you might see a face like this' keeping an eye out for a tasty Field vole – although hunting from a perch is more common in winter, when energy saving measures are required!

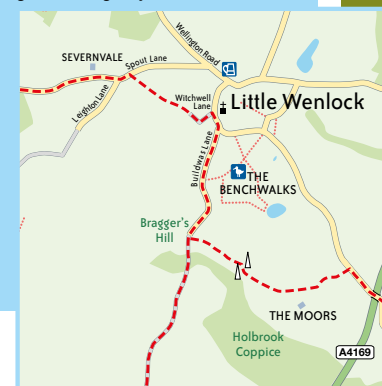


Buildwas Lane

Going Severnside

Whether you went over or around The Wrekin, you should have ended up heading south on the path through Spout Lane Plantation. On reaching the thoroughfare from which the wood takes its name, turn left and follow the Shropshire Way towards Little Wenlock. On the edge of the village, just after passing Leighton Lane, turn right and follow the footpath along a field edge – you are now on the Bench Walks!

Climb over the stile into Witchwell Lane and turn right at the end of the road for Buildwas Lane. Before reaching Braggers Hill, you can take a detour and discover the rest of the Bench Walks or just plough on towards the River Severn. At the bottom of the lane, turn left onto the main road, walk to the next junction (for Ironbridge and Much Wenlock) and turn left immediately before Buildwas Bridge.



Tales of the Riverbank

Like the onrushing stream valleys that sweep down from the hill itself, the outward leg of our southern exploration of the Wrekin Forest inevitably leads to the River Severn. Ours is a relatively brief dalliance with Britain's longest waterway but there is still much to see as we enter Ironbridge Gorge.

Relax and Walk Downstream

Rising near Plynlimon, deep in the Cambrian mountains of mid Wales, the Severn flows for some 220 miles through the Marches of Western England towards Gloucester, before disgorging its contents into the Bristol Channel. Apart from being a major source of public drinking water, the wildlife and habitat associated with the river and its many tributaries is of truly international significance – a fact reflected in the many designated sites along its lengthy course. We join the Severn just as the wide floodplains that characterise its upper reaches give way to steeply wooded river valley terrain, forming the backdrop for its passage through south-east Shropshire and north Worcestershire. These vertical woodlands teem with a rich diversity of life but the undisturbed meadows and sheep pasture surrounding you have great value, too, storing water in times of flooding and hosting ephemeral pools



A walk along the Severn Way reveals a mosaic of pasture, meadow and scrub

On the banks of the River Severn near Buildwas



that provide the connections aquatic species need to explore the wider landscape.

Hunting High and Low

Chief among the varied fauna of the Severn are its many bird species. One of the characteristic features of this stretch of the river are its exposures of bedrock and boulders and, at Dale End, they are readily utilised by hunting Kingfisher – while the shallows near Buildwas Bridge provide perfect habitat for Dipper, the UK's only truly aquatic songbird. The island and riverbanks here are also great places to observe the habits of summer migrants like Spotted flycatchers, as they rise from and return to the same perch after catching their insect prey, while the hedgerows, willow and nettle scrub in the area support large numbers of African warblers, including Chiff Chaff and Whitethroat. Some of the highest profile visitors from that

William Nevett



Superbird! Dippers can walk on the bottom, swim in, and hunt on the surface of water bodies

continent, however, are the swifts, swallows and martins that skim the river's surface and wheel in the skies above it, feasting on the riverflies that breed prolifically on these waters each summer.

The Banded and the Beautiful

With the breeding season over for most birds, August and September is the time when many of our native species adopt a low profile and begin the process of moulting their worn out feathers. To compensate, the warm, sunny days of summer on the Severn bring another equally alluring winged spectacle, for this is a key habitat for two of our most stunning damselflies: the Beautiful and Banded demoiselle. Together with dragonflies, they belong to a class of insect known as 'Odonata' (meaning 'toothed jaw') but are smaller, more delicate and less powerful fliers than their cousins, so tend to stay much closer to water. Telling them apart is not too difficult, either, as most damselflies hold their wings shut at rest (a dragonfly's remain open) and have eyes that do not touch in the middle. Beautiful and Banded demoiselles are also unique among damselfly species for their coloured wings.

Alec Connah



In the shadow of the cooling tower: a male Banded demoiselle enjoying some 'me time'!



A male Orange-tip butterfly feasts on a drooping cluster of riverside Comfrey flowers

However, theirs is certainly not the only show in town when it comes to amazing invertebrate life on the river. If you want to sample a true cross section of the diversity to be found on this stretch of the Severn, wandering through the dense stands of Comfrey that flower prolifically along its muddy banks throughout spring and summer will reveal much. Here, you will discover all manner of insect life gorging on the seemingly endless supplies of pollen and nectar, from early season bumblebees and hoverflies to day-flying moths, butterflies, longhorn beetles and much, much more besides.

Along the Severn Way

After traversing the main road to Ironbridge Gorge for a few hundred yards (a length of which has no pavement), a stile will lead you onto the Severn Way – Britain's longest riverside footpath. Before you reach Coalbrookdale the trail heads back onto the highway. The banks of the river can get very muddy here so it may be advisable to stay on this course until you reach Station Road, our chosen route to the Ropewalk. The choice is yours but please remember the Severn is a powerful and dangerous river at all times of the year, so ALWAYS take great care while traversing its banks! Depending on the length of your river walk, the approach to the final leg of the journey may vary a little. If you made it to Ironbridge, walk through the Wharfage car park to the road, turn left, go straight across the roundabout and take the next right into Station Road (if you left the Severn Way before reaching Dale End, this will be a left turn from the main road).



The Big Picture

By the time we scramble up the Ropewalk and head back towards Wellington it is much easier to see The Wrekin Forest for the trees. This mosaic habitat is very much like a symbiotic jigsaw, with each piece of the puzzle dependent on the other for survival.

Habitats in the Balance

It is easy to take the kind of splendid isolation you can find in the wooded stream valleys of the Wrekin Forest for granted. The secluded charms of places like the Loamhole Dingle have been acquired naturally, over a long period of time, and are recognised nationally for their importance in creating habitat for a wide range of species. Nowadays, this distinctive setting is supported by a management programme that nurtures its lugubrious qualities but this picture of benign neglect is not necessarily reflected elsewhere. Along the floodplains of the River Severn, grazing marsh that once provided valuable storage for excess water has declined rapidly in the last fifty

years through changing agricultural practices and increasing pressure on resources from urban areas. Meanwhile, modifications associated with abstraction for drinking water and other historic activity such as dredging have all inhibited the river's ability to move naturally across its plain, reducing habitat diversity and impoverishing wildlife in the process. Conversely, other areas of the forest have suffered precisely because they have been under-managed – without commercial practices such as coppicing, for instance, many of the woodlands around the hill have developed thick canopies, shading out the forest floor and reducing biodiversity. In this context, ensuring

the next generation of walkers continue to enjoy the Wrekin Forest's 'big landscape' is bound to be a complex and challenging task requiring a great deal of specialist input. However, as visitors to this mini-wilderness we can all help to play our part as custodians of its future.

The Future is Purple

As we have seen, The Wrekin's heathland is among its most precious resources. Being an entirely manmade habitat, it requires constant intervention to survive and key to its prosperity is the health of the woody dwarf shrubs that lend the area so much of its visual character and provide food and shelter for its wildlife. For countless summers on end, large swathes of the hilltop have been engulfed in a vivid mass of colour by the numerous stands of bilberry and heather that envelop it but the future of this seemingly timeless spectacle is by no means assured. For the rich purple displays of a vibrant heather landscape depend very much on

the ability of the plant to renew itself. Threatening the new shoots needed to replenish the mature stands are not only marauding bracken fronds but the trampling feet of some of the eighty thousand or so annual visitors to the hill. Aside from watching where we step, the help of those who use the hill for regular recreation will also be needed to ensure others can continue to enjoy this special landscape in the future. Many disparate communities of Wrekin wanderers, from walkers to cyclists and horse riders, explore the forest everyday but many of the myriad byways that traverse the area are seldom used, badly connected and in some instances completely overgrown! Getting involved, from reporting a blocked footpath or broken stile to debating the future of access to the whole forest, may just be easier than you think...

Going the Extra Mile

Wellington Local Agenda 21 Group is a not-for-profit community organisation that looks for local solutions to the global environmental challenges affecting us all. We maintain a long-term commitment to help promote and protect The Wrekin and the surrounding green network of wildlife sites and paths, so if you have a problem to report while traversing the hill why not contact us at the website below? If we don't know the answer, we probably know someone who will!

To learn about our work, or discover more about The Wrekin Forest and east Shropshire's rich natural heritage, please visit our dedicated website where you can find other titles from the 'Explore The Wrekin' series: The Five Towns and Wild Wrekin trails.

www.wellingtonla21.org.uk



The Final Leg

At the Greenwood Centre, on Station Road, you can take a path off the highway for a while before reaching Coach Road and the impressive viaduct across Upper Furnace Pool. At the junction, turn left and walk uphill for a few hundred yards to the entrance for the Ropewalk. Go through the gates, cross Ropewalk Meadow and ascend three flights of steps (numbering 47 in total!) before taking the way-marked route off to the left. Follow the path through the woods, cross a small field and turn left when you reach the track to Leasows Farm. At the road junction, turn right, cross the bridge over Ironbridge bypass and take the next left to the Moors. Before you reach the property, the path veers off right and heads northwest across several fields (keep a look out for Shropshire Way disc markers affirming the route) to Buildwas Lane.



The Ropewalk



Picture this: you – here! In the heart of the Wrekin Forest on the edge of Wenlocks Wood