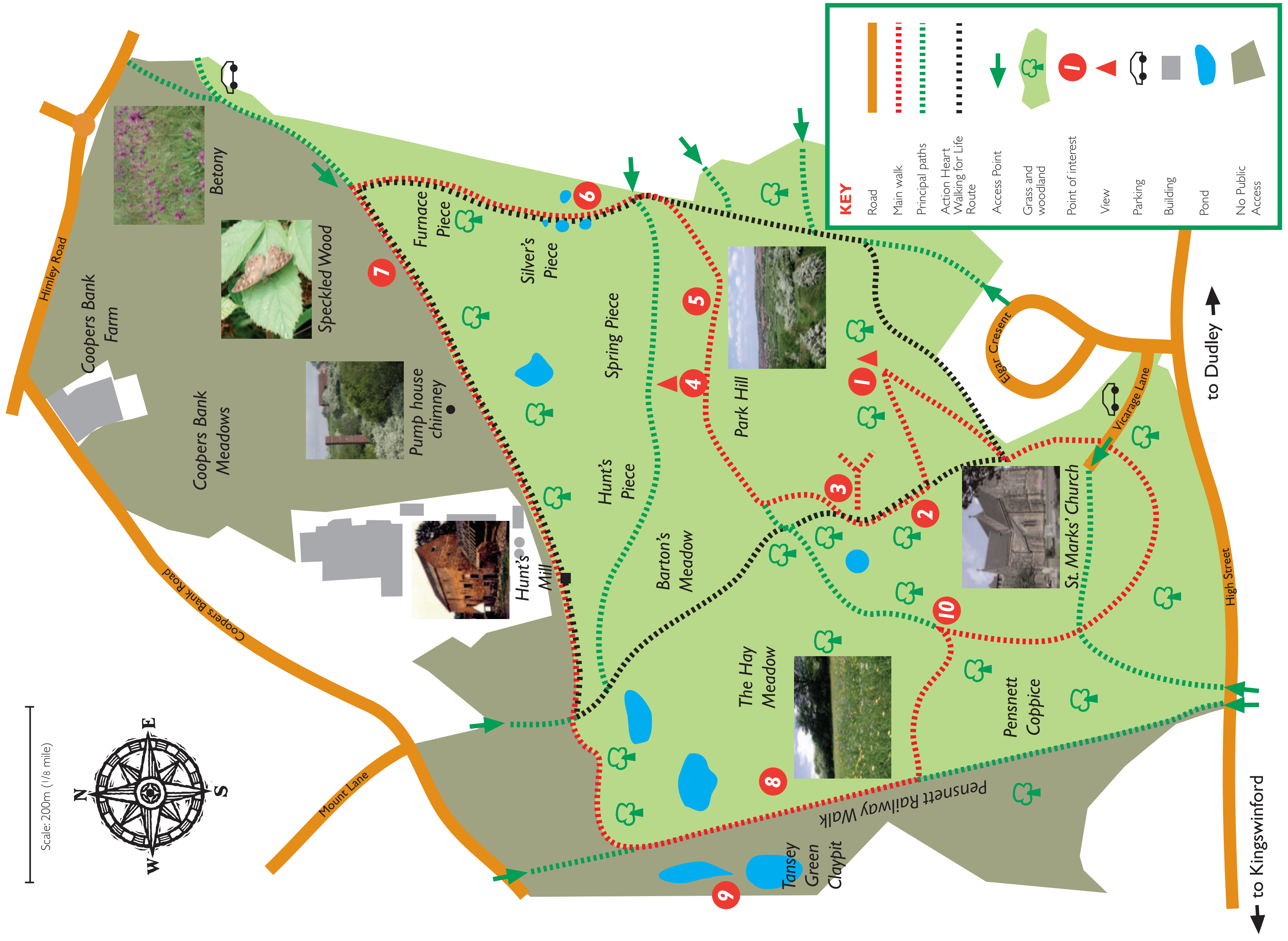

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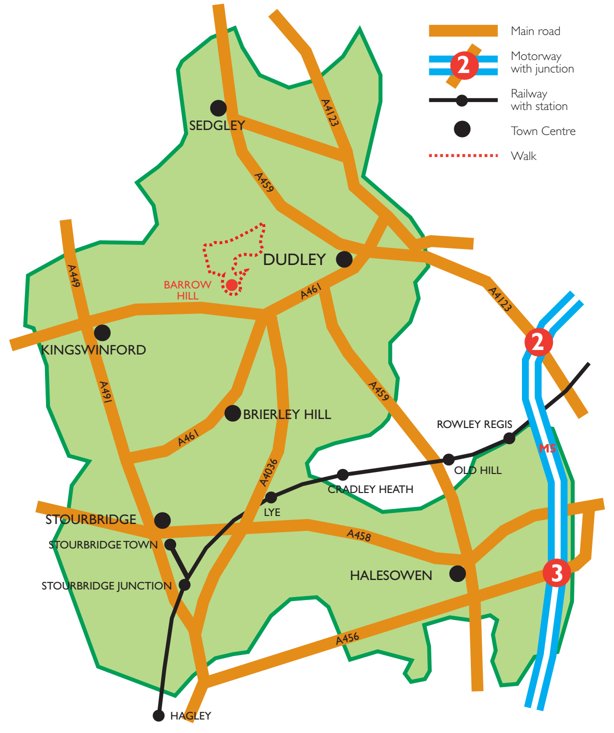
COUNTRYSIDE WALKS IN DUDLEY

Barrow Hill



Barrow Hill is a Local Nature Reserve and Site of Importance for Nature Conservation, notable for its richness of wildlife and habitats, and significant geological and archaeological features. This walk guides you from the summit of Barrow Hill with its magnificent views, through picturesque woodlands and grasslands, past several ponds rich with amphibian life, and to disused quarries with excellent exposed rock faces of high geological value. The walk also takes you past Coopers Bank, which lies to the north of Barrow Hill, and Tansey Green Claypit, which lies to the west; both are Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. Part of Tansey Green Claypit, along with the Barrow Hill quarry, is also a Geological Conservation Review Site of national importance for its volcanic features.

Pre-historical and Historical Interest

Barrow Hill has an intriguing history to which it owes its current diversity of habitats, geological features and diverse flora and fauna. Remarkably, Barrow Hill itself was once a part of an active volcano, and is the only proven example of surface volcanic activity in the Black Country area. The earliest evidence of human presence at the site were two burial chambers (barrows) found on the northern slopes of Barrow Hill, believed to date back to the Bronze Age, 2000BC to 700BC.

The whole area was once densely wooded and formed part of the Pensnett Chase. The word 'Pensnett' derives from 'Pen Snaeth'. Pen is a Celtic word which means hillside, and sneath is an Anglo-Saxon word that describes a small fenced area. Although now lost, it is probably related to a fenced off part of the woodland, possibly a collecting point for deer or woodland products. During the 13th century an area of the Chase, named New Park, was used as fenced hunting ground for the Baron of Dudley and his hunting parties from Dudley Castle. The baron and his huntsmen would meet on Barrow Hill:

> *"Looking abroad over the Chase; over its patchwork surface, lifting and falling and swelling knolls and valleys of mottled green; over its duller moors and fresh green lays which stretch southwards to the Stour".*
>
> D.R Guttery

Whilst the huntsmen and bloodhounds nosed for a scent, the butler would serve the baron and his gentry with a princely banquet:

> *"Cold kynes of veale, colde capon, Beefe and Goose,*
> *With Pigeon pyes and Mutton colde, are set on hunger loose.*
> *First Neates' tongs poudred well and gambones of the Hogge,*
> *Then saulsages and savery knackes to set men's myndes on gogge!"*
>
> D.R Guttery

During the late 1200s the Lords of Dudley began to realise the wealth hidden beneath the surface of the Chase, and the 'baron's playground' later became a great workshop of industrial man. The earliest industry was charcoal burning, which survived up until the mid 19th century. Industrial activities built up gradually until in the 17th and 18th centuries ironworks, quarries and coalmines pockmarked the face of the Chase. In 1665, Dud Dudley, Lord Dudley's illegitimate son, claimed to have smelted iron ore using coal instead of charcoal, but if he did so the secret was lost until Abraham Darby continued the process from 1709 at Coalbrookdale. In 1829, the first section of the Pensnett Railway was completed, which eventually comprised 40 miles of track linking the Earl of Dudley's enterprises. The 1800s were a high point for the industries, however, by the early 20th century the raw materials began to deplete and many factories and collieries closed down. Wildlife has now reclaimed the landscape, and the railway is now a walk and cycleway, yet a few clues to the rich history of the area still remain.

LENGTH	3.1km (2 miles)
TIME	2 hours
ACCESS	Numerous access points on foot
PARKING	Limited parking near St Mark's church and small car park off Merryfield Road
BUSES	Centro Hotline for information 0121 200 2700
GROUPS	Pensnett Wildlife Group - contact Wildspace Officers for details on 01384 815718

POINTS OF INTEREST

1. Barrow Hill Incline

The summit of Barrow Hill rises to over 152m (500ft) above sea level. From this vantage point there are panoramic views of the surrounding landscape, including the Staffordshire countryside, The Wrekin, The Clent Hills and the Brown Clee in Shropshire. The name Barrow Hill refers to the two Bronze Age burial mounds found on the northern slope of the hill. The mounds have since been lost due to quarrying activities. A large cross, commissioned by St. Mark's Church, now marks the summit of the hill. During the Cold War, an early warning system was hidden underground and was used to listen to radio signals transmitted from the East. The hill itself is a basalt intrusion which formed around 300 million years ago, in the Carboniferous Period. At this time, hot magma and gas spat from a volcanic vent, and hot ash clouds were emitted. The height of the hill is now much reduced due to mining activities and erosion.

A view of the Wrekin from the summit of Barrow Hill

2. Barrow Hill Copse

The copse is a small area of woodland with a rich ground flora, where vibrant pockets of Bluebell can be found in late spring. It is also in the spring that the call of Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler, migrant species of bird from Europe, resonate throughout the woodland. The future management of the copse will help ensure and enhance its richness of wildlife.

3. Disused Quarry

Within the now peaceful, green and sheltered quarry you can find evidence of Barrow Hill's volcanic past. Taking the footpath to the right you arrive at a quarry rockface in which cracks full of white shiny crystals (calcite veining) can be seen. The calcite was carried in superheated groundwater and steam that, as it cooled, deposited the minerals by precipitation forming the veins. The pathway leads on to two further exposures of rocks: the one to the left displays hexagonal pillars that formed during the slow cooling of the basalt. The exposure to the right of the pathway reveals a mixture of igneous rock and country rock (the rock into which the hot molten magma was injected), which became churned up as the molten rock pushed its way to the surface. An area of baked clay with a purple reaction rim can be seen in the lower section of the exposure.

4. Viewpoint

The pathway from the quarry leads through an area known historically as Park Hill, along this pathway a viewpoint is reached. Looking north, you can see a chimney, which is the remnant of an old colliery pump house. Looking beyond the chimney, Coopers Bank Farm can be seen with its imposing hay-barn and surrounding neutral species rich grasslands. The fields and hedgerows themselves represent living history, having remained almost unchanged while quarrying, mining and industry transformed the surrounding landscape. Many old meadow and pasture wildflowers are found here, including Quaking Grass, Betony, Field Scabious, Ladies Bedstraw and Greater Knapweed.

5. Grazed fields

This tree-lined walkway is an important wildlife corridor. The fields to the left are managed by rotational grazing, this allows fields to 'rest' between grazing periods and prevents over-grazing.

6. Ponds

The ponds are sited in an area of open scrubland and are ideal amphibian habitats. Many of the ponds owe their origins to water being pumped up from the mines. Species found in and around the ponds include frogs, toads, Smooth Newts and Great Crested Newts, the latter of which have been introduced to the ponds as part of a conservation-breeding programme undertaken by the Pensnett Wildlife Group

One of the amphibian ponds

7. Disused Railway Line

The pathway follows the track of the disused Gibbons Branch railway and passes alongside fields named: Furnace Piece, Silver's Piece, Spring Piece and Hunt's Piece. The pathway also passes closely by the old pump house chimney, and further along, the site of Hunt's Mill. The mill, dating from at least 1780, was demolished in 1986 after falling into disrepair. Historically, the mill was used in bread production for the Earl of Dudley, and in 1887 was listed as a corn mill. The adjacent farm building was used as a dairy farm until the cattle were lost in the foot and mouth epidemic of 1972. The farm was then used for the production of beef cattle until the early 1980s. Tettenhall Dick pear trees can be found along the track; historically, local businesses planted this regional variety to provide fruits to make perry for their workers.

Hunt's Mill Farm

8. Hay Meadow

This ancient hay meadow supports a number of grasses and a good range of broadleaved plants including; Lesser Knapweed, Tormentil, Cat's Ear, Meadow Buttercup, Yarrow, Smooth Hawksbeard and Oxeye Daisy. Hay Rattle is also found here, this unusual plant is partly parasitic on grasses, obtaining some of its nourishment from their root systems. The diversity of the field is further enhanced by the presence of marshy areas and a pool. Lady's Smock, Lesser Spearwort and various rushes and sedges can be found. Recent Wildspace! funding has paid towards the fencing to enable rotational grazing.

Small Tortoiseshell butterfly on Lesser Knapweed

9. Tansey Green Claypit

This privately owned disused claypit, still worked until recently, has a history of coal and Etruria Marl clay extraction for brick making. Beneath the surface of the area are hidden the world's oldest perfectly preserved three-dimensional conifer fossils, fossilised in life positions where they stood, after being buried by a gentle rain of ash from the ancient Barrow Hill Volcano.

10. Pensnett Chase

"And swarmed the 'beasts of the chase'- the buck, the doe, the fox, the marten, the roe, the hare, the coney, the brock (badger), the otter, not to mention the varmynt (vermin)-the moldy warpes (moles), urchines (hedgehogs), fychewes (polecats), weasels, stoats and 'myse and rates."

D.R.Guttery

This area of ancient woodland with mature Oak, Sycamore, Ash and Beech, is a remnant of Pensnett Chase, which originally covered an area extending as far as Enville and Bobbington. The ground flora includes plants known as 'ancient woodland indicators'. In spring you can find Bluebells, Yellow Archangel, Violets, and the nodding flower-heads of Wood Melick. Woodland birds such as Nuthatch and Treecreeper can be spotted probing the bark for their insect prey.

Pensnett Chase

References:

D. R. Guttery (1950) *The Story of Pensnett Chase*
Dudley Libraries and Arts Department.: Dudley

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Photographs:

Karen Jones and Paul Hancox (Hunt's Mill and Hunt's Mill Farm)

The Countryside Code

From a gentle stroll or relaxing picnic to a long-distant walk or heart-pumping adventure, the countryside provides every opportunity for enjoyment and relaxation.

- Be safe - plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people

If you follow the Countryside Code wherever you go, you'll get the best enjoyment possible and you'll help to protect the countryside now and for future generations.

www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk

This walk is part of a network of 14 walks throughout the many areas of meadow, wetland, farmland and woodland within the Borough of Dudley. All the walks put you in close contact with the attractive local countryside. The leaflets fully illustrate the route of each walk and give information about points of interest along the way. You can usually join the walks in several places and link with other public rights of way and canal towpaths.

The walk leaflets printed so far include:

Blackbrook Valley; Pensnett Railway; The Stour Valley; Buckpool and Fens Pool; Illey and Lapal; Leasowes and Coombeswood; Bumble Hole; The Limestone Walk; Lutley Walk; Pedmore Walk; The Shenstone Way; Cotwall End Valley.

Some of the paths at Barrow Hill are surfaced, but all may be muddy when wet. Gradients and crossfalls are typically shallow, but some short sections may have steeper inclines or be stepped. There are gates or stiles at some entrances.

For further information about these walks or any aspect of the countryside in Dudley, please telephone *(01384)* 814189.

Happy walking!

Dudley's Wildspace! Project

The Big Lottery Fund has allocated £125 million to its Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities programme, to help urban and rural communities to understand, improve and care for their natural and living environment. It is working in partnership with English Nature to deliver over £5 million of funding under Wildspace! - a grant scheme for local nature reserves.

In August 2001, Dudley MBC applied to English Nature for a Wildspace! grant towards the management of three nature reserves, Barrow Hill in Pensnett, Cotwall End Valley in Sedgley, and Bumble Hole in Netherton. The application was successful, with the Council being given a grant towards management over a three-year period. This funding has enabled the Council to appoint a dedicated Officer to oversee and co-ordinate a range of habitat and access improvements.

The project is largely concerned with promoting access to green spaces, raising awareness and encouraging communities to get actively involved in looking after their local nature reserves.

For further information on Dudley's Wildspace! Project guided walks, and volunteering opportunities please contact:

Wildspace Officers Karen Jones and Stephen Rowland, on 01384 815718

Wildspace!

Supported by

Barrow Hill