



# Friends of Shirtcliffe

## Introduction

Shirtcliffe Valley is in the southeast quadrant of Sheffield. It runs westward from Richmond Road towards Beaver Hill Road, right on the boundary between the districts of Handsworth (on the north side) and Woodhouse (on the south).

The valley is steeply sided, with woods (Smelter and Shirtcliffe) at either end. Between the two woods is a stretch of former pastureland, which is now turning to scrub. Above the woods and the scrub on the north side of the valley are the fields and paddocks of Myrtle Bank Farm.

In addition, there are two areas of grassland (probably modern). The first is at the top of Smelter Wood at the Sundown Place / Bramley Avenue entrances. The second borders the Trans Pennine Trail (TPT) to the foot of Smelter Wood.

The Shirtcliffe Brook rises somewhere in the Richmond / Bramley Housing Estates. It then flows through Smelter Wood, the Scrub, and Shirtcliffe Wood to Schubert Bridge. At this point it goes under Beaver Hill Road and emerges on the other side in Flockton Park. The brook has still not been properly investigated yet, but a start has been made.

For the purposes of this survey, the area has been divided into four sections.

- 1) Shirtcliffe Wood
- 2) The Scrub
- 3) Smelter Wood
- 4) Fields, Paddocks and Hedges (these are part of Myrtle Bank Farm)

## Description of Sections

### 1) Shirtcliffe Wood

The north side of the wood is richly covered with many species of plants. This particular section appears to be Ancient Woodland – several different examples of Ancient Woodland Indicators have been recorded here, including some of the ‘strong’ indicators. There is a good mix of trees, such as sessile oak, wych elm, hawthorn, alder, holly and hazel.

The south side is poorer. The greater part of this side was used for drift mining (the Swallow Seam emerges in the middle of the wood. The soil is contaminated with spoil from the workings. Most of the trees (mainly pedunculate oak) are relatively young, said to have been planted for commercial or industrial purposes post WW2. However, there is a small section, from Beaver Hill Road to the Vicar Lane Path, which is free of contamination. This area was previously used for gardens, pasture or crop growing. The undergrowth mainly consists of bluebells and some ferns. It is worth noting that, on the west bank at the top of Vicar Lane path, there is a large patch of wood sorrel (a strong AWI).

There is a small pool, filling the top of a mineshaft above the boardwalk at the heart of the wood. This pool has no inlet from the stream, being above stream level. It appears to be filled by seepage from the surrounding land. Nothing grows in it. Presumably the water is too poor in oxygen to support any life. The very soft bottom appears to be composed almost entirely of a layer of fallen leaves of an unknown depth.

## 2) The Scrub

This section is on the north side of the valley. It was used as pasture for cattle up until the 1960s. Once the cattle had been removed, the land was left unmanaged. It is now being colonised by pedunculate oak and hawthorn. However, there is still a large variety of legumes and meadow grasses to be found.

There are four areas worth a special mention:

### a) The Edge

This is the flat grassy terrace at the top of the north side of the valley. Just below it is a largish thicket of broom. Whitebeam and bird cherry have been planted here. There is also silver birch and honeysuckle. Just next to the Broom Patch is one of the few patches of bracken. This covers a bank that used to be a viewpoint looking out towards Woodhouse. Unfortunately, the view is now obscured by trees.

Below the western end of the Edge is a sharp cut-off, evidence of an old sandstone quarry (mid 19th century).

### b) Severnside Meadow

This is a grassy area below and opposite the Severnside Housing Estate. The rare Adder's Tongue Fern grows here. Every year, in late summer, the meadow has to be mown and raked off to conserve the fern.

### c) The Boggy Bit

This is a very low-lying patch by the brook, just as it vanishes into the culvert below the Cardwell Housing Estate. The culvert ingress was almost completely choked with logs and branches, and has had to be cleared. At the same time, a lot of dumped rubbish (including a shower tray) has had to be removed from the adjacent banks. This has caused the patch to dry out a little on the brook side. In addition, motor bikers have caused deep rutting to the ground in the centre of the boggy bit. As a result of these actions, the watercress that used to grow on the stream bank has been lost. However, the lady's smock, a relative newcomer, appears to be increasing – though slowly. It is noteworthy that toad rush, sharp-flowered rush and floating sweet-grass are still holding their own at the centre of the patch.

### d) Calcium Corner

When the Mosborough Parkway was built in the 1980s, the bend of the brook next to the workings was taken into a culvert. This culvert, and the Victorian sewer running next to it, was covered over with a layer of limestone chippings. This area, between the bottom of Smelter Wood and the bridge to the TPT, is now a habitat rich in calcium – with associated vegetation, such as zig-zag clover, hairy tare, smooth tare, and tufted vetch. The corner may also be the last remnant of what was known to local inhabitants as the 'Fairy Dell'.

At the foot of the TPT bank there is also a small pool surrounded by compact rush and soft rush, and in which reed mace is growing. The pool does not appear to have a connection to the brook.

### 3) Smelter Wood

Smelter Wood occupies a very steep cleft on the north side of the valley. The whole wood feels much more cramped – even gloomy. This may simply be because it is the steepest and narrowest part of the valley.

The flora is not as rich as in Shirtcliffe Wood, and there are fewer indicators of ancient woodland. Moreover, the oak woodland is being crowded out by invading ash trees.

There are three areas worthy of special note:

#### a) The Small Glade

This is at the top of and to the east of Smelter Wood. The narrow path into it is almost opposite the Bramley Avenue entrance.

There were mine workings here and the soil, a whitish clay, shows some contamination with spoil (black flecks) from those workings.

The vegetation is at variance with the rest of the valley, looking almost like downland, rather than woodland or meadow. There are birches, fine leaved grasses, and 4 or 5 terrestrial lichens at the drier northern edge.

At the southern end, the glade dips and becomes wetter (perhaps subsiding into underlying shafts). Here are found toad rush, compact rush, and sharp-flowered rush. There is also floating sweet-grass, and sedge (not yet properly identified). Tadpoles have been found in Spring in the little pools at this end.

#### b) The Grasslands

The first of the grasslands is on the west side of Smelter Wood, bordering the TPT. Several different varieties of Crab Apple have been planted into the grass. The fruit is fairly large and brightly coloured. I am told that they are particularly delicious in Blackberry & Apple pies.

The second grassland is on the north side, by the Bramley Avenue / Sundown Place entrances.

These grasslands appear to be fairly modern – perhaps left over from the building of the housing estates. The vegetation is rough and with little diversity, compared with the richness of species found in the Scrub.

#### c) The Trans-Pennine Trail (TPT)

This runs from Richmond road, between the Mosborough Parkway and Smelter Wood. At the Cardwell housing estate it veers off south towards Woodhouse and beyond to the Shire Brook Nature Reserve.

Native trees and bushes have been planted along the bank that separates the Trail from the Mosborough Parkway.

#### 4) Fields, Hedges and Paddocks

Shirtcliffe Valley is bordered by Myrtle bank Farm on its north edge; indeed the Scrub was once pasture belonging to the farm. Since anything that is done to the fields affects the valley, it has been decided to include this area in the survey.

##### a) Fields

For convenience, the fields have been labelled A to G (see map).

Crop rotation is no longer practised on the farm. For the past two years, cereal has been sown in Autumn in all the fields. No part is left fallow.

Most of the skylarks have decamped, probably to Beighton Tip, so I am told – as this has been converted to rough grassland ideal for these birds.

##### b) Hedges

These are mainly hawthorn, with two exceptions

i) The hedge round the paddocks is composed of holly.

ii) The hedge bordering G, on the side by the Bridle Path above Shirtcliffe Wood is hazel.

Also noteworthy is the hedge bordering the allotments on Church Lane (which is outside the survey). This is composed of cherry plum.

Yellowhammers, dunnocks, whitethroats and other small birds nest in these hedges.

##### c) The Paddocks

There are two paddocks, one on either side of the path leading from the bottom of Church Lane up to the track between fields D & E. The larger paddock (next to field C) is where the old farmhouse stood. There are still some of the old trees left from the farmhouse garden – a couple of yews and a large sweet chestnut.

A horse named Jake was kept in these paddocks for nearly thirty years. He was well known in the neighbourhood. However, he died in Autumn 2006, and his owner gave up the paddocks. The new owner took down the wire fence and removed most of the bushes, including a laburnum, but left the yew trees and the chestnut. He also left in a couple of largish apple trees, which are very popular with the local scrumping community.

The new owner's stated intention is to run a couple of ponies on the Paddocks after he has finished with the refurbishment.