



# Highbury Wood NNR

## Welcome to the National Nature Reserve

Highbury Wood National Nature Reserve lies on the eastern bank of the River Wye near the village of Redbrook.

It forms a link in the almost unbroken chain of ancient woods which stretch from Chepstow to Ross-on-Wye and is a prime example of the very rich and diverse woodland for which the Wye Valley is internationally important.

The wood, which covers 46 hectares (115 acres), was bought by English Nature in 1986. It is managed to conserve its features and wildlife. Here visitors can see coppicing in practice – a type of traditional management that was widespread in most of the region's woods until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### History

The wood has survived through to the present day due to its inaccessibility and steep slopes, making clearance for agriculture impractical. It has, however, been used by humans for centuries as a source of timber and fuel. Because the ancient woodland has unbroken links with the 'wildwood', which colonised the valley slopes after the last Ice Age, it has retained a great variety of plant and animal species.

The oldest sign of human influence at Highbury is the prominent section of Offa's Dyke which runs the length of the wood. It is part of an earthwork constructed around 780AD, stretching from Chepstow to Prestatyn, which once marked the western boundary of the Mercian empire.

Today, a National Trail follows the route of the Dyke.

Old records indicate that the wood was once sub-divided into a number of parts - Bells Charity Wood, Kiln Wood, and Davids Grove are all identified on early maps - and their boundaries are still discernable from old pollard trees and banks within the Reserve.

Some of the flatter ground was once cleared as grazing land. These areas were abandoned long ago and woodland has since re-colonised them.

Highbury was a valuable resource in the past. Not only did it provide fuel for domestic use in the village, but charcoal was produced here too. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the blast furnace at Lower Redbrook provided a ready market for all that could be supplied and, later, a copper smelting works also relied on locally-produced charcoal.

Lime kilns are visible throughout the reserve - evidence that people once relied on the availability of limestone which outcrops in Highbury Wood. Originally built to use wood, it appears coal was later used to fire the kilns.

### Habitats and species

The wood is noted for its variety of woodland types, reflecting the wide range of soils, aspect and drainage on the site.

Much of the woodland canopy is dominated by ash, cherry and small-leaved lime with mature beech - especially close to Offa's Dyke.

Large-leaved lime, which is restricted to the Wye Valley, wild service tree and whitebeam are among the scarcer trees. Yew trees are a particular feature of the reserve and some may be more than 300 year old. Alder dominates the clay soil on the lower slopes and hazel, along with dogwood, wayfaring tree and spindle, forms the understorey throughout much of the wood.

The management of the reserve ensures that a range of habitats flourish. Newly-coppiced areas provide open ground conditions which favour light-demanding flowers such as primrose and early purple orchid. Wood spurge, which persists as buried seed in shady conditions, also bursts into life in response to the increased warmth and light.

These conditions favour insects which feed on the abundant nectar and benefit from the shelter of the surrounding trees. Butterflies are among the more obvious insects thriving in the coppice coupes and dragonflies are regular visitors, preying on flies and midges.

As the coppice re-grows, the habitat becomes ideal for scrub-nesting birds including blackcap and garden warbler.

The dense tangle of bramble and shrubs offers them protection and food. In full light, the shrubs flower and produce berries encouraging both insect and bird life. Another beneficiary is the dormouse which relies on a wide range of nuts, berries and, critically, honeysuckle. Scarce now in Britain, dormice should be helped by the reintroduction of coppicing at Highbury. Their numbers are being carefully monitored on the reserve.

In the non-intervention zone, standing and fallen dead wood is left in-situ. It is used by insects and fungi which aid the process of recycling nutrients. Woodpeckers, great tits, nuthatches and treecreepers are amongst the birds that find food and nest sites here.

The oldest stands of trees contain mature lime, beech, yew and oak. These areas have not been disturbed for many decades and are rich in dead wood and ferns. Pollarding - the practice of cutting branches at head height - is visible on

many of the limes bordering Offa's Dyke. These old trees provide niches for hole-nesting birds.

Limestone outcrops in these old stands provide refuges for fox and badger whilst the rocks themselves are rich in ferns, mosses and liverworts.

## Management

Because of the wood's long history of coppicing and the presence of many species associated with the open and early stages of growth, Natural England has revived this form of management in part of the reserve.

Fallow deer have caused considerable problems by browsing the new shoots of coppice stools and hindering re-growth. Culling has reduced numbers, but deer move in from the surrounding woods where they are not controlled, so a large proportion of the reserve has been deer-fenced to prevent further damage.

The tracks and rides within the reserve are managed to offer the widest range of conditions for wildlife and act as connecting 'corridors' between coppice coupes. Elsewhere, the wood is deliberately left unmanaged, except for the removal of hazardous trees above footpaths, and the occasional re-pollarding of limes to retain these feature trees.

The reserve is surveyed and monitored to increase understanding of the wood and to study the effects of management.

## Facilities and access

You are welcome to visit Highbury Wood National Nature Reserve. Please keep to the waymarked public rights of way. These paths form a circular route (2.5 km) through the wood which passes many of the features described in this guide.

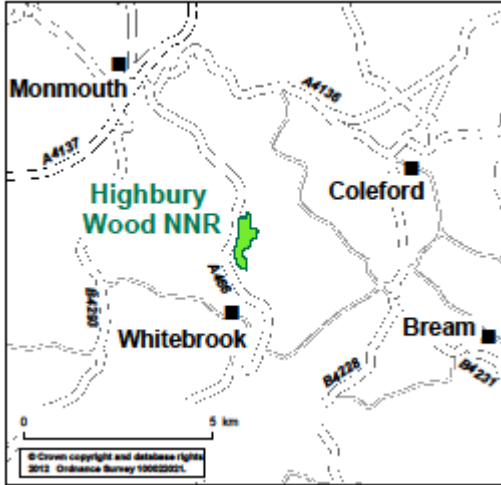
Please help us by keeping your dogs under control and taking litter home.

Try to avoid disturbing the wildlife of this special place and leave wildflowers for others to enjoy.

The nearest toilet and refreshment facilities are in local towns and villages.

## Location

The reserve is 6 km south east of Monmouth. It lies on the eastern bank of the River Wye and is almost immediately adjacent the A466. The nearest villages are Redbrook (0.5 km to the north) and Newland (1 km to the north east).



**By car:** Access to the reserve is via minor roads from the A466, A4136 and B4228.

**By train:** The nearest train station is in Chepstow (15 km to the south) served by Arriva Trains Wales.

**By bus:** There are bus services along the A466 from Chepstow to Monmouth via Redbrook. See [www.transportdirect.info](http://www.transportdirect.info) for journey planning.

**By foot:** Offa's Dyke National Trail crosses the reserve, the Wye Valley Walk runs nearby.

## Contact

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