

Assarted Enclosure

Areas within this Zone

'Low Harley Countryside', 'Low Harley Countryside', 'Thorpe Hesley Countryside', 'Hesley Wood and Barley Hole Countryside'

Summary of Dominant Character

This zone, limited to the north-western-most corner of the borough, is made up of ancient woodlands and ancient irregular enclosure patterns whose key characteristics are small, sinuous or rounded fields with mainly hedged boundaries. Very little of the land was formerly part of a medieval open field system (see 'Strip Enclosure and 'Agglomerated Enclosure' zones) with the majority of records of enclosed land in this area having being recorded by the project as originating from the piecemeal enclosure of land. This pattern of land enclosure is characterised by irregular field boundaries exhibiting no overall level of planned organisation. Irregular patterns of enclosure originate when an area of land is subdivided over many years by many separate actions of enclosure. Common medieval processes which are known to have resulted in irregular piecemeal enclosure patterns include the assartment of heavily wooded landscapes, moorlands and wetlands (Taylor 1975, 94-105), and the gradual subdivision for sale or lease of former deer parks.

The zone is situated across an alternating and geologically folded section of the middle coal measures whose alternating bands of shales, sandstone and coal seams have weathered to produce a rolling hilly landscape with steeper scarps on western hillsides. Areas of woodland have often survived on the steeper slopes and this landform may have influenced the supposed later clearance of these areas. Areas of the zone typically occupy a parish edge location indicating that their clearance may have been as a result of a separate process to the establishment of open field systems closer to the nucleated settlements at their centre (Fig1).

Settlement in this zone is generally dispersed in character, with three medieval farm buildings recorded by the South Yorkshire Sites and Monument Record (SYAS 2008) at isolated non-nucleated sites.

Relationship with Adjacent Zones

This zone is restricted to a small area in the north west of the district (Fig 1) - this is the only area of the RMBC district where the middle coal measure geological landforms (with which assarted landscapes are strongly associated) has not been substantially urbanised. To the south of the zone historic map regression shows that similarly heavily wooded, irregular piecemeal landscapes preceded the later urban and extractive landscapes now to be found in the western edges of the parishes of Rotherham,

Orgreave and Treeton. The older irregular field patterns tend to be associated with dispersed settlements; nucleated settlements are related to areas of former common field agriculture.

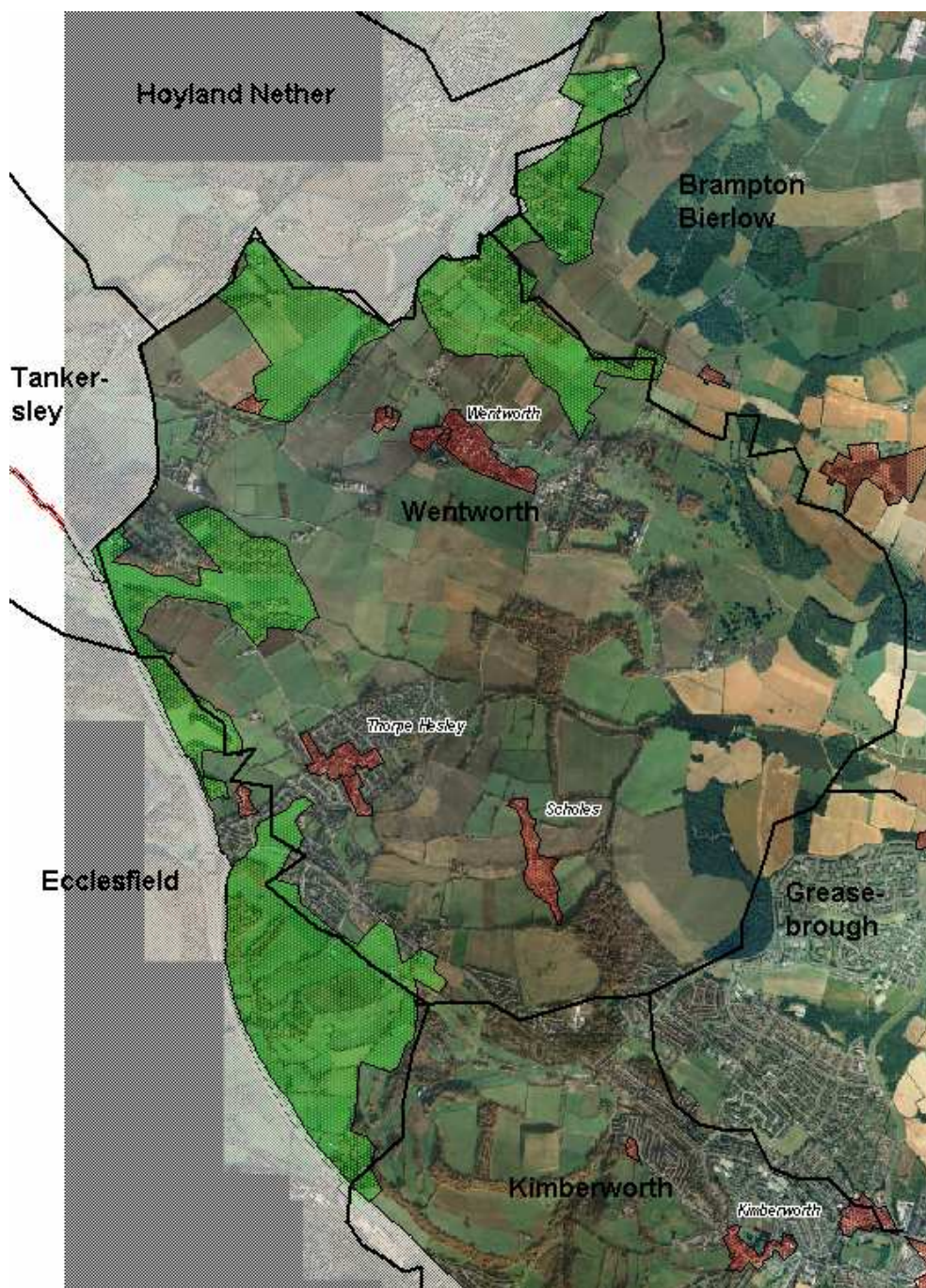


Figure 1: The 'Assarted Enclosure Zone' (green) typically occupies parish edge locations (black lines) at more distant locations from medieval nucleated settlements (red) which tend to be surrounded by agglomerated former open field landscapes. Other examples of Assarted Enclosure zones continue across the modern political borders in Sheffield and Barnsley. The heavily wooded areas outside the zone in Wentworth and Kimberworth parish were probably assarted at the time of their emparkment as a landscape park and deer park respectively. Cities Revealed aerial photography © the GeoInformation Group, 1999.

The zone is adjacent to two large areas within the 'Private Parkland' zone at Wentworth Woodhouse and Kimberworth. Similar relationships can be seen throughout Barnsley's Assarted Enclosure Zone and has been remarked on elsewhere in the country as due in part to the former wooded character of the area as a link has been made between heavily wooded regions and high numbers of deer parks (Rackham 1986, 123).

Inherited Character

Landscapes resulting from piecemeal woodland clearance are generally considered more likely to contain botanically rich hedgerows (Taylor 1975, 95) and examples of mature irregular hedgerows can be seen in most of the areas.

Remnants of the ancient woodlands, from which much of this enclosed landscape was assarted, can be seen across this zone. These larger areas of woodland typically survive on steep slopes where land has been impractical to clear for agriculture. The survival of ancient woodland on marginal land is also evident when the woodland distribution is compared with historic parish boundaries. Consistent with the overall distribution of this zone many of the woodlands are on the edge of the parish, sometimes straddling parish boundaries.

Although much removed from the landscape, woodland was an important resource in the medieval and later periods. Woodland was of course the chief source of timber, which was the major building material until the 17th century transition to stone (Hey 1979, 131). Woods and wooded pastures were also utilised for fuel production and grazing land from the medieval period onwards (Rackham 1986, 89,121). The driving force for the expansion of enclosure into wooded areas may have been increases in the population of the area in the early medieval period (Hey 1979, 72). This would explain the 'parish edge' location so characteristic of these landscapes.

Although little or no methodological archaeological survey has taken place in the ancient woodlands of this zone, where other ancient woodlands in Rotherham have been surveyed in detail (Cumberpatch 2001; Lee and Richardson 2003; Lee 2005) they have been shown to preserve a wide variety of earthwork features of prehistoric to modern date. Only two records are currently held on the SMR for monuments within this zone, both within King's Wood. One records a surviving earthwork along a historic parish boundary (SMR 1127/01), the other, an 18th century colliery air shaft (SMR 2851/01). However, historic mapping and the evidence from other woodlands suggests that further unrecorded features are highly likely. Clear evidence can be seen for example on recent LIDAR survey data (Figure 2) for the survival of the annular spoil heaps often associated with 'bell pit' mining techniques within the woodlands adjacent to the M1 motorway.



Figure 2: LIDAR Survey has the potential to reveal earthworks (such as these probable bell pit spoil heaps within Spring Wood) that are otherwise poorly visible on vertical aerial photographs.

LIDAR survey image [left] © Environment Agency, 2006 - Cities Revealed aerial photography [right] © the Geoinformation Group, 1999.

As the above images show, the earthworks provided by bell pit mining are also visible in enclosed landscapes outside woodland areas. In South Yorkshire the latest known examples of these monuments, which generally relate to the extraction of iron ore, date to the mid 19th century and include the large planned groups at Tankersley Park (Jones 1995, 99) and Hood Hill (SMR 3511) which are likely to have been associated with the systematic exploitation of iron ore reserves on the Fitzwilliam Estate. However ironstone mining in South Yorkshire is known to have been exploited as early as the 12th century by Cistercian monks from Kirkstead Abbey in Lincolnshire at Thundercliffe Grange (Munford 2000, 48) and 12th century bell pit mining has been securely dated at the West Yorkshire Cistercian Bentley Grange site (Taylor 1972, 80). Surviving earthworks in this zone therefore have the potential to range in date from the 12th to the 19th centuries.

Later Characteristics

As with agricultural enclosed landscapes throughout South Yorkshire the most dramatic landscape trend has been the removal of field boundaries to produce progressively larger units of production and the increasing mechanisation of cultivation techniques. These processes tend towards the homogenisation of landscape character and of the land area of this zone over 50% (and the bulk of the enclosed land) has been recorded as 'Agglomerated Fields' due to their level of boundary loss, the most rapid period of change recorded as being within the range 1945-1982.

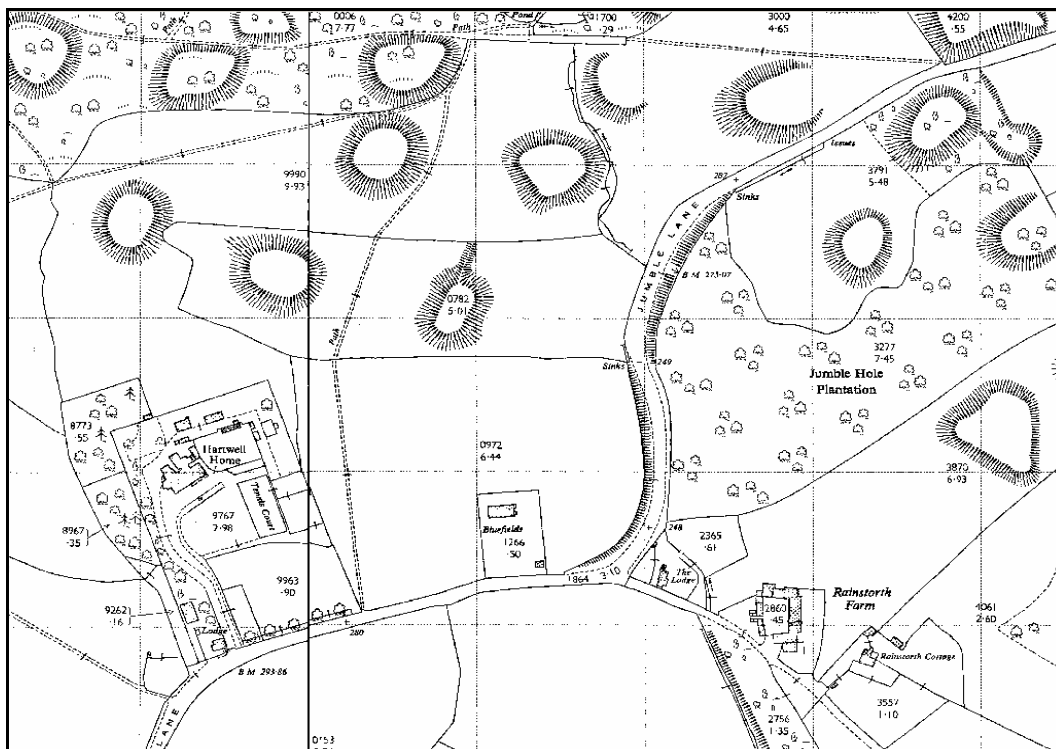
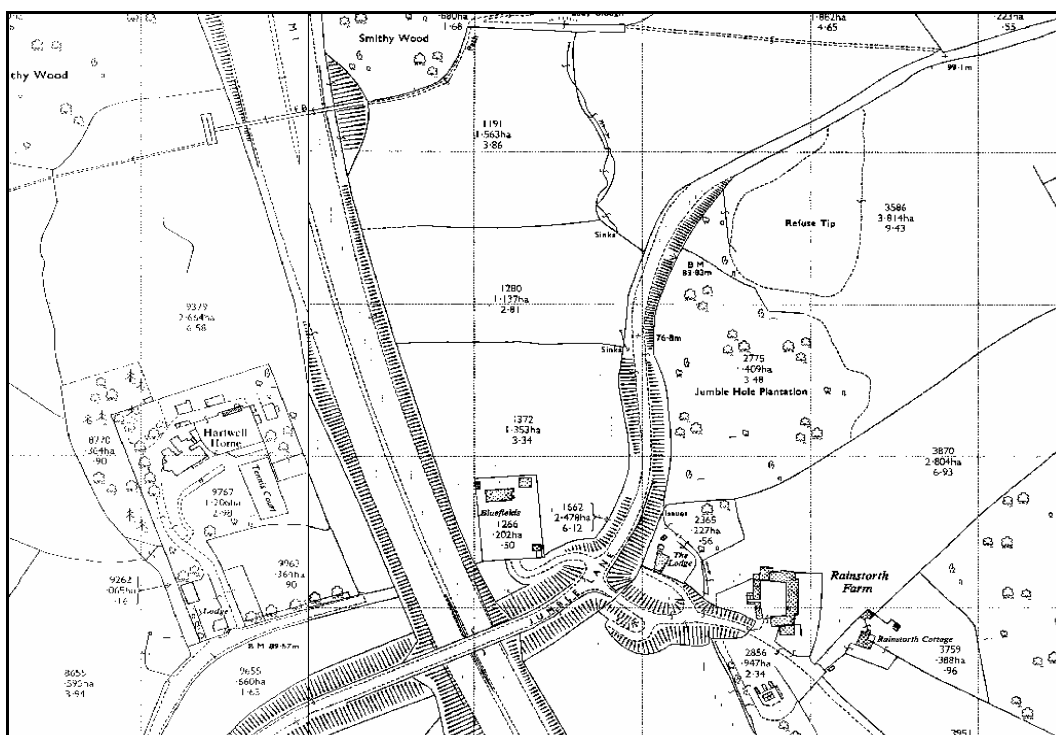


Figure 3: These extracts of 1:2500 OS mapping were published in 1965 and 1970 and show the rapid landscape change around the time of construction of the M1 motorway. All traces of spoil heaps in this area have been ploughed flat; some fields have been truncated and rationalised; Jumble Hole plantation has largely been felled; and new carriageways and massive embankments now dominate the surrounding countryside.

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Agglomeration has gone hand in hand with the introduction of new cultivation practices, in some parts of this zone including the introduction of arable cultivation into previously pastoral areas which has had a dramatic impact on the survival of earthwork features such as bell pit spoil heaps (Figure 3). The most dramatic later 20th century change within this landscape has been the construction of the M1 motorway across it in the later 1960s. This road, which now forms the western edge of the 'Hesley Wood and Barley Hole Countryside' and 'Thorpe Hesley Countryside' character areas truncates earlier landscape features and has redefined the boundary between the historic administrative units of Ecclesfield on the Sheffield side of the road and Kimberworth and Wentworth on the Rotherham side.

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