

Minibeast Feast

Claypit Hill

GREAT ASHBY



Woodlands are constantly changing with the seasons...

...and also with life cycles of growing, dying, and decomposing. Claypithill's Spring has a lot of dead wood on the floor. This might look untidy to humans, but it is home to lots of small creatures. Inside the logs and under the bark you might find woodlice, beetles, spiders and insect larvae. When a tree dies, the dead wood is a perfect place for fungi to grow. The wood is slowly eaten by minibeasts, and rots back in to the soil, releasing its nutrients for other trees to use.

Spaces created mean sunlight can reach the woodland floor. Wild flowers bloom, providing nectar for insects like butterflies and bees. Over many years, tree seedlings will grow up blocking out the light, and the whole cycle starts again. During the last century trees in this woodland have been planted for timber. In autumn beech and sweet chestnut trees drop their seeds, protected in prickly cases, which squirrels and mice feast on before winter.



Creeping Change

Woods are changing all the time...

...Just like seeing yourself in the mirror every day and then suddenly realising you've grown old. If you visit the woods often you might not notice these changes! Although many of trees in this wood were planted at the same time, if you look closely you will see areas where younger trees are growing. These seedlings take advantage of gaps created by fallen trees, which rot away on the ground.

Brooches Wood is an area of Ancient Woodland, which means that there have been trees here for at

least 400 years. However, humans have changed what grows here. The trees you see now are not part of the natural woodland that developed over centuries. Since World War II, a lot of Britain's ancient woodlands have been cleared and replanted for timber with fast growing trees like the conifers and sycamore that you see here today.

Now, people recognise how important ancient woodlands are for biodiversity, which means it is home to a huge range of animals and plants.

Native tree species like hornbeam and oak are being encouraged to grow, with glades of wildflowers in sunny gaps. Ancient woodland provides a perfect habitat for wildlife, as they evolved over time side by side. The robins and other birds in your garden are actually just visiting, the woodland is their real home. Look out for the hornbeam "coppards" along the boundary of Cleveland Way.

These would have originally been coppiced but later allowed to grow taller and pollarded, cut higher up where the growing shoots were out of reach of animals like deer.



Special Trees

Serpentine & Thirlmere Woods

GREAT ASHBY



There are some special trees in Serpentine Wood...

...that deserve a hug! Tucked away amongst the oak and hazel trees near the District Park are some elm trees, a species that has been devastated in Britain by Dutch elm disease. Once a prominent feature in the British landscape, large elms can be seen in paintings by Constable and Turner. Dutch elm disease is spread by elm bark beetles, which attack healthy trees as they grow larger.

Small elm trees still grow across Hertfordshire, but bigger elms like these are far more rare.

Hazel trees in these woods were once coppiced. They were cut down to stumps which re-grew to produce many thin stems. The cut wood was used for building, fencing and making charcoal.

The southern edge of these woods is marked by an old wood bank, where coppiced trees run in a line on a raised earth bank showing an old boundary.



Great Ashby Estate

Circular Walk

GREAT ASHBY



Great Ashby is bordered by several woods...

...each with their own character. Follow the Great Ashby Woodland Walk to discover more about your woodland neighbours, how the woods change with the passing of time, and some of the special things which live there.

This Woodland Walk leads you around the Great Ashby Estate, taking in five woodlands managed by North Hertfordshire District Council. Four of the woodlands have their own short route for you to explore. Look out for the map boards at the entrances to Brooches Wood, Claypithill's Spring and Serpentine Woods which will tell you more.

Distances:

In total the Woodland Walk is a 2.8 kilometres circuit and will take approximately an hour to complete.

The short circuits within the woods are between 200 and 600 metres.

Accessibility:

Some of the paths are unsurfaced, but there are no stiles. Unless weather conditions are very poor for the route is accessible to pushchairs. Regular stopping points with benches are located along the way.

Look at the map to see where you can join other public rights of way outside Great Ashby, why not extend your walk in to the Hertfordshire countryside.

