

Piece of Green History

The Smestow Valley has a unique place in the history of urban nature conservation, since it formed the basis for the groundbreaking study "The Endless Village" in the 1970s. This study led to the first Urban Wildlife Group being formed, and was used by the Nature Conservancy Council as a model for all "green corridor" nature reserves in towns and cities throughout Britain. It was fitting, that in June 1998 the Smestow Valley was designated Wolverhampton's first official Local Nature Reserve.



The old railway station is used as an office for the Ranger. The office is not staffed full time but arrangements can be made to use the office, toilets and meeting room for occasions such as educational visits, guided tours or just as a meeting point. To make arrangements to use the station please contact the office direct on 01902 552351 or call 01902 551155

Please note the Railway Walk may be used for cycling but there is a code of conduct for all cyclists which must be observed.

For further information

about Smestow Valley L.N.R. and facilities available phone Tettenhall Ranger Centre on 01902 552351 City Direct on 01902 551155 Tourist Information Centre 01902 556110 www.wolverhampton.gov.uk/smestow



Tettenhall Ranger Centre

Smestow Valley

Local Nature Reserve

The Reserve lies on the north west corner of the Birmingham-Wolverhampton conurbation and forms a green corridor some four kilometres long and totalling 48 hectares. It runs south westwards from Oxley to Wightwick covering much of the Smestow Valley, between the dense industrial and residential sprawl which stretches south eastwards to the Black Country and Birmingham, and residential areas which border Shropshire and South Staffordshire. The reserve combines grassland, scrub, woodland, the crowded vegetation alongside the old Kingswinford branch railway trackbed, the secluded margins of the Staffs and Worcs Canal, and the green margins of the Smestow Brook.

The Smestow Valley's true start is to the north east of the nature reserve, running down from the Smestow Brook's source in the Park Village area of the city, through Fowlers Park and between Bushbury and Dunstall Hill to Aldersley, where it meets the "Aldersley Gap" between Oxley and Blakeley Green. This gap, nearly 350ft above sea level, was created at the end of the last Ice Age as rock debris and glacial meltwater moved down from what now marks the boundary between the catchment areas for the rivers Trent and Severn. From here the Smestow Brook runs southwards between high land either side, the valley's sandstone edges most obvious along Castlecroft Lane and Wightwick bank, and in the old quarry workings between Compton and Windmill Lane. The valley peters out to the south of Wightwick, with the canal heading directly south, the brook meandering south west through Trescott, then south through Seisdon, Trysull and Wombourne, and the high land curving away to the north west along Perton ridge to Nurton and Pattingham.

The Smestow Brook runs through the length of the nature reserve and is part of the catchment area for the rivers Stour and Severn. Its path along the Smestow Valley has been altered by man over the last 200 years, with some sections straightened or culverted. Its waters are now increasingly clean, despite a history of pollution from industrial areas close to its source. Its fall towards the Stour, which it joins north of Kinver, is steep enough to have at one time served some 30 water mills. The Smestow is joined from the east along its progress through the valley by the Graiseley and Finchfield brooks.



KEY

- 1 Dunstall Water Bridge
- 2 Wildside Activity Centre
- 3 Meccano Bridge
- 4 Compton Lock
- 5 Wightwick Mill Lock
- 6 Wightwick Manor
- 7 Dunstall Park
- 8 Aldersley Leisure Village
- 9 Tettenhall Ranger Centre
- Green Belt
- Woodland
- Meadowland
- Paths
- Pond
- Picnic Areas
- Bus Routes from W'ton

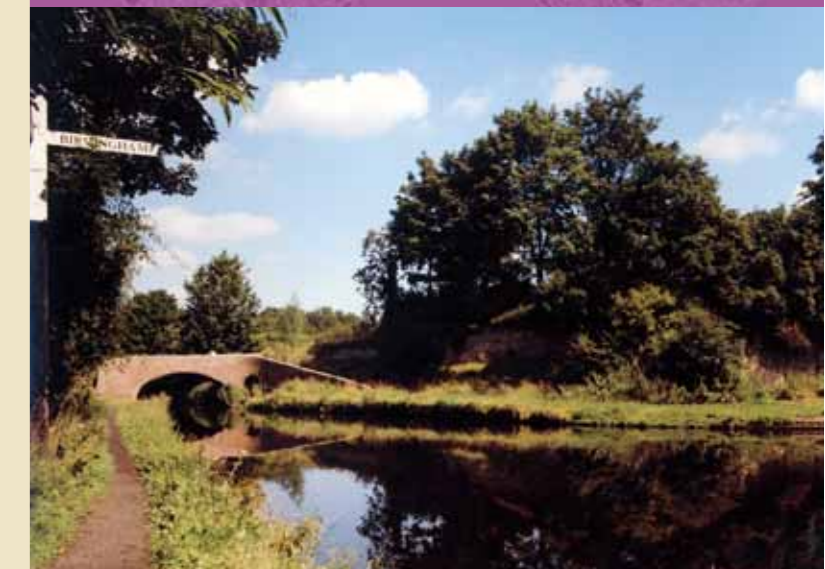
The Staffs and Worcs Canal

Forty six miles long, completed in 1772 and designed by the engineer James Brindley, the canal runs through the nature reserve alongside the Smestow Brook to below Windmill Lane in Wightwick, and links the Trent and Mersey Canal at Great Hayward with the River Severn at Stourport. Just north of the Smestow Valley at Pendeford it joins with the Shropshire Union Canal, which runs north west to Chester and the River Dee. At Aldersley, the Birmingham Canal leaves the Staffs and Worcs to climb 21 locks into the centre of Wolverhampton, where, at over 400ft above sea level, boats can then travel through Bilston, Tipton and West Bromwich to the centre of Birmingham. Strategically important for trade between the Potteries, Birmingham and via the Severn to Bristol, the Staffs and Worcs was in profit for most of its working life, with commercial traffic ending in the 1950s. Today it is a busy cruiseway for holiday hire and privately owned boats.

The Kingswinford Branch Railway

The original intention was to link Wolverhampton with Bridgnorth, but the proposed section to the south west of Compton was never built. The Great Western Railway company started work on the line in 1913, but the First World War halted proceedings, and the first train did not run until 1925. Passenger traffic lasted only seven years, but the line was used during the Second World War as a freight route to avoid the bombing of Birmingham and the Black Country. The last trains ran in 1965, when the route was axed amid branch line closures across Britain. The old trackbed is now a walkway, forming the "spine" of the nature reserve from Aldersley to Compton, before running alongside its eastern boundary to continue into Castlecroft and South Staffordshire.

Smestow Valley



Local Nature Reserve



Wolverhampton
City Council



The Reserve's Wildlife

Wolverhampton is not always associated with the sights and sounds of nature, and visitors are surprised to find even the slightest break in the vast industrial and residential sprawl of the Black Country-Wolverhampton conurbation. Yet only a mile from the centre of the city, there is a green, quiet world, where woods, streams, canals and an old railway trackbed provide a rich habitat for plants, insects, birds and animals.

The Smestow Valley, once a main artery for canal trade, a freight rail route and neighbour to the huge Courtaulds factory complex, has in 40 years taken on a wild, natural character. Playingfields, private gardens and open land that was once farmed are also an important part of this green corridor.



Comma butterfly

Insects Among the earliest insects to appear are different species of bumblebee, with some butterflies also on the wing in spring, such as Orange Tip, Speckled Wood and Small Tortoiseshell. More than 20 kinds of butterfly have been seen on the reserve, among them Ringlet, Common Blue, Holly Blue, Peacock, Red Admiral, Painted Lady, Green-veined White, Comma, Gatekeeper, Small Skipper, Large Skipper, Meadow Brown, the less frequently recorded Purple Hairstreak, Small Heath and Small Copper, and rare visitors like Brimstone and Clouded Yellow. Day-flying moths can be found, such as the Cinnabar, Six-spot Burnett, Orange Underwing and Chimney Sweeper. Damselflies and dragonflies hunt over the canals and ponds, with Banded Agrion, Common Blue Damselfly, Emperor Dragonfly, Broad-bodied Chaser and Black-tailed Skimmer among species recorded.

Flowers Flowers bring colour to canal banks, woodland edges and grassland from spring to late summer. Lesser Celandine and Butterbur appear as the days grow longer, and as warmer weather takes hold, many other plants flourish, including Bluebell, Red and White Campion, Common Dog Violet, Field Pansy, St. John's Wort, Ramsons, Meadow Cranesbill, Clover, Common Vetch, Cow Parsley, Broom, Birdsfoot Trefoil, Nettle-leaved Bellflower, Common Comfrey, Foxglove, Yellow Archangel and Hemp-Nettle. Look out along the canals for Shining Cranesbill, Ivy-leaved Toadflax, Arrowhead, Yellow Iris, Common Water-plantain, Meadowsweet and Water Figwort. Blankets of late summer colour across open land are provided by Oxford Ragwort, Creeping Thistle and Rosebay Willowherb.



Dandelion

Mammals Mammals have a less obvious presence along the valley, but patience can produce sightings of Fox, Water Vole and even Weasel. Also active are Mole, Rabbit, Bank Vole, Brown Rat, Water Shrew, Common Shrew, Wood Mouse and Hedgehog, and there has been evidence of Otter visits - its less welcome cousin the Mink has occasionally appeared. Four kinds of bat are known either to live in or visit the valley, with the tiny Pipistrelle hawking around woods and gardens, and its larger Noctule, Long-eared and Daubenton relatives making appearances.

Amphibians and Reptiles Pond edges are covered in spring by the spawn of the Common Frog, the locally rare Grass Snake has been recorded, and the reserve boasts a breeding site for the nationally protected Great Crested Newt.

Birds More than 55 species of bird are known to have bred in the Smestow Valley, and over 30 of these species are present throughout the year. An astonishing total of 170 - plus species have been recorded, and a walk at any time of year can be rewarding for birdwatchers.

In winter the number of Blackbird, Chaffinch and other common species is boosted by an influx of birds from the Continent, in addition to annual visitors like Redwing, Fieldfare, Redpoll and Siskin. Other cold weather birds include Little Grebe and Snipe, and Lapwing and Golden Plover flocks can be seen circling Dunstall Park, which is also a wintering site for a large number of gulls. Late winter sees breeding activity among Rook, Collared Dove and Mistle Thrush, with other residents like Blue Tit, Robin, Wren and Hedge Sparrow choosing nest sites, and birds of prey such as Buzzard and Sparrowhawk contesting territories.



So close to the City. St.Peter's Church and the Mander House tower are landmarks on the Wolverhampton skyline and seem within touching distance in this view from the reserve's hay meadow just north of Compton.

Spring brings migrating birds from Africa into the valley, some to breed locally like Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Whitethroat, others to stay briefly before moving on. These passage visitors include Wheatear, Sand Martin, plus wading birds such as Common Sandpiper. The summer months witness Kestrel hovering over grassland, Green and Great Spotted



Rook

photograph courtesy of Chris Gomersall and rspb-images.com

Woodpeckers feeding youngsters at nest holes, and flotillas of Moorhen chicks and Mallard ducklings on the canals. As the year draws on, migrants on their return journey south pass through, like Yellow Wagtail, Swallow and Whinchat, with flocks of Swift and House Martin hawking for insects before their own departure.

Autumn sees Jay raiding oak trees for acorns, while Kingfisher patrol the canals, Tawny Owl call from copses and Canada Goose skeins fly over. With the return of winter, feeding Long-tailed Tit flocks are joined by Nuthatch, Treecreeper and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, the canals are visited by Mute Swan, and Rook, Crow and Jackdaw arrive nightly in huge numbers to roost.

Wightwick Manor

Situated close to the southern end of the nature reserve, this handsome late Victorian part-timbered building is only a few minutes walk from Windmill Lane canal bridge. Now run by the National Trust, the house was the home of Wolverhampton paint manufacturer Theodore Mander, and is famous for its William Morris designed wallpapers, fabrics and fittings. It is fronted by a beautifully landscaped Edwardian garden, running down to the Bridgnorth Road. *Wightwick Manor, Wightwick Bank.*
Tel: 01902 761400

Dunstall Park Racecourse

Although not part of the nature reserve, the racecourse is one of Wolverhampton's largest open green areas, and provides important wildlife habitat for the Smestow Valley. The grass track is no longer used, but the course has been revitalised with an all-weather racing surface. A lake which was created to prevent flooding from the Smestow Brook provides the valley's only large expanse of open water, and attracts migrant and resident water birds. *Dunstall Park Racecourse, Gorsebrook Road.*
Tel: 01902 421421



Hawthorn Wood