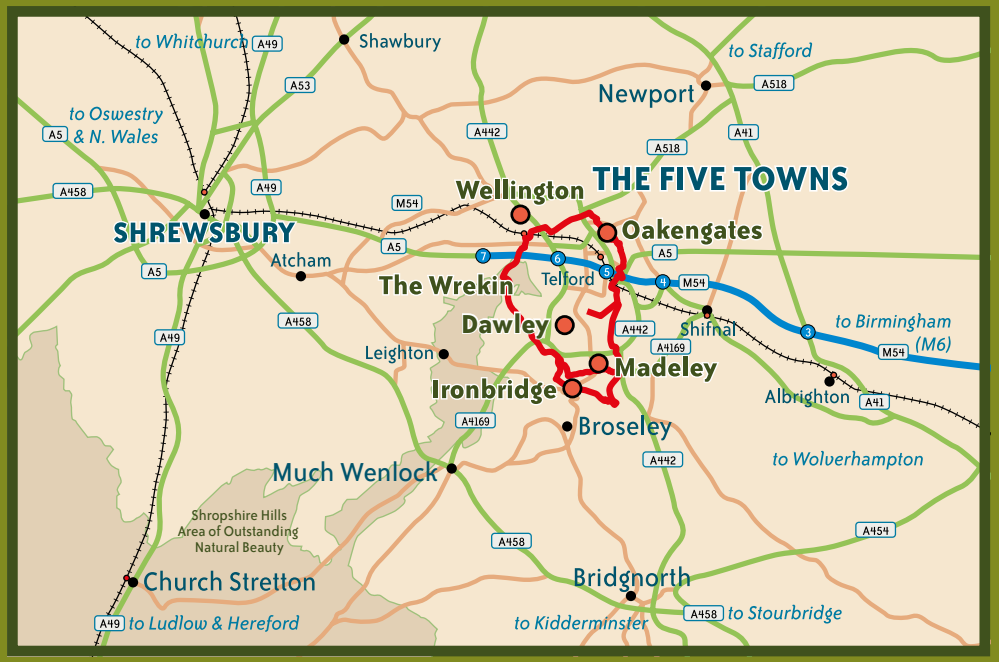


Following the Trail

The Five Towns Wrekin Trail is a circular cycle tour linking Wellington, Oakengates, Dawley, Madeley and Ironbridge to The Wrekin – part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The trail utilises existing sections of the National Cycle Network and other traffic-free routes but involves some interaction with other road users. Take care at all times and always follow the highway code: ride single file where the road is narrow, slow down for passing walkers, horse riders and other vehicles and watch out for gravel or greasy roads after rain. There are several steep gradients and busy junctions en route, so always ride decisively and positively. Secure cycle parking facilities and help with spares and repairs can be found at various points along the route – for details, consult the map in the centre of this booklet. To discover more about The Wrekin and other local heritage attractions in east Shropsire visit:

www.wellingtonla21.org.uk/discover

Written by **Marc Petty.** Photography by **Gordon Dickins** and **Marc Petty**.
Designed by **MA Creative** and printed by **Graphic & Print, Telford**

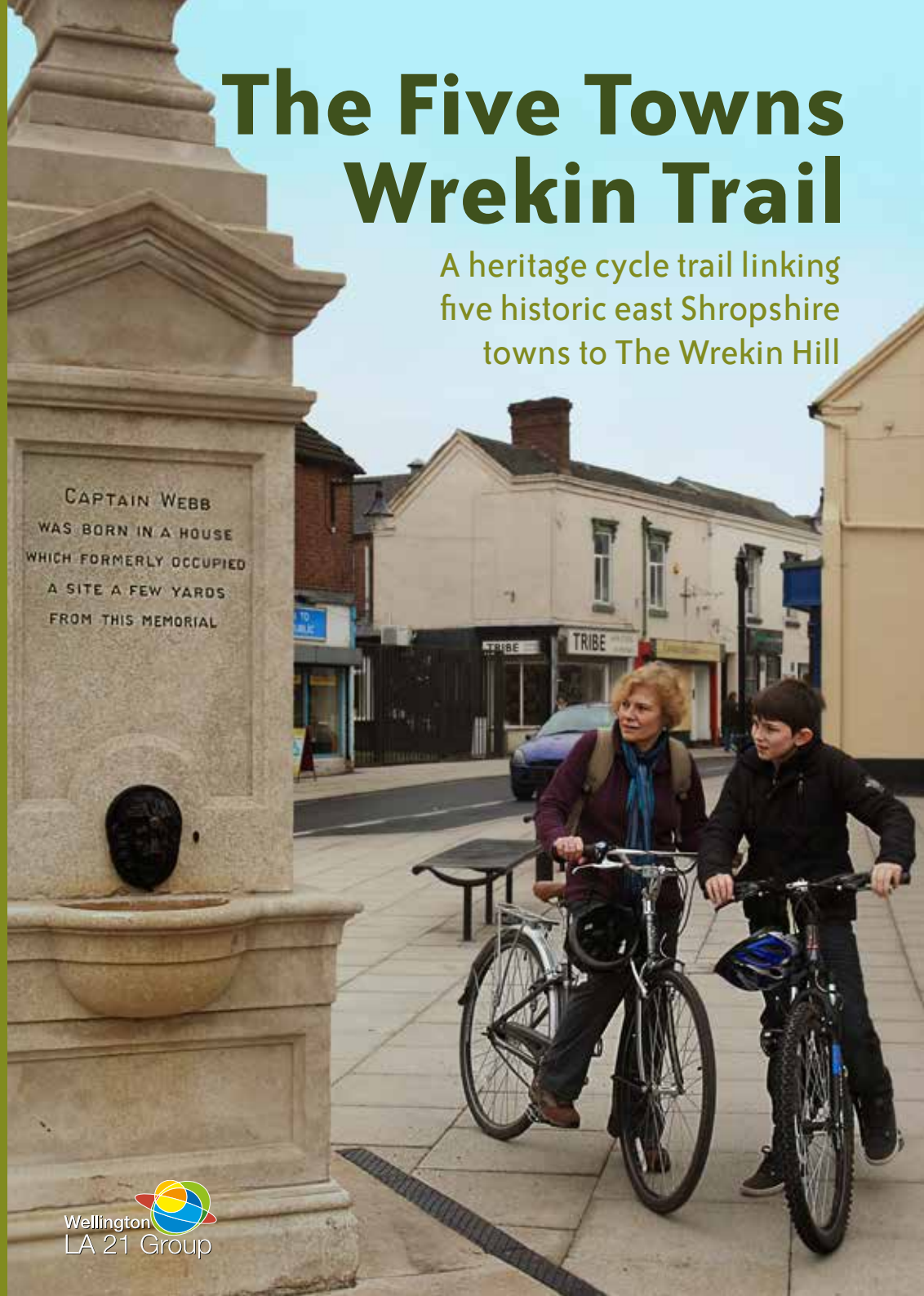
Thanks to: Gordon Dickins, Cath Landles, Glenn Bishton, Alec Connah, Neil Clarke, Shelagh Lewis, John Powell, Malcolm Peel, George Evans, John Hughes, Geoff Shinner, Pete Lambert, and the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership.

This re-print is supported by:

a co-operative council | Telford & Wrekin COUNCIL | Great Dawley Parish Council | Madeley Parish Council

The Five Towns Wrekin Trail

A heritage cycle trail linking five historic east Shropshire towns to The Wrekin Hill



Wellington LA 21 Group


The Wrekin and Lawrence's Hill

Welcome to Wrekin Country

The Wrekin is one of the Midlands most iconic natural landmarks and a popular destination for thousands of visitors every year. Stretched out below the hill is a lesser known but equally remarkable green network of wildlife sites and historic landscapes where five towns that helped shape the world we know today all grew up. So come with us now and explore the *Five Towns Wrekin Trail*...


The Wrekin from The Ercall

The Wrekin Hills

The Wrekin and its sister hills have been a favoured visitor location for at least the last three thousand years, in which time Celtic tribes, Roman legions and medieval monarchs have all left their own indelible mark on the landscape. However, to find the area's true lineage we need to go much further back… to a time when Shropshire was located roughly where the Falkland Islands are today. It was here that The Wrekin first emerged, in a period of mountain building 566 million years ago. Despite its size, The Wrekin is not the oldest hill in the range – that honour belongs to the Little Hill, which, at 677 million years old, contains rocks that pre-date life on Earth itself.

Landscape Heritage

The varied geology of The Wrekin Hills has helped create a spectacular landscape that is officially recognised as part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Aside from being home to the largest area of woodland in east Shropshire, there are heathlands, wetlands and wooded dingles that are home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. As you might expect, the rich mineral wealth of the area has long made it a target for industrial activity. However, old mine workings and former quarries are now being re-colonised, providing important habitats for rare plants and insects that thrive in reclaimed grasslands such as those found at the foot of The Ercall, which is now famed for the geological exposures created by years of quarrying.


Cycling around Little Hll


Little Haye, Church Steet, Madeley

The Five Towns

The Five Towns Wrekin Trail is a 16-mile circular cycle tour linking The Wrekin Hills to Wellington, Oakengates, Dawley, Madeley and Ironbridge. Each of the towns has intimate links with The Wrekin, and at least three of them began life as clearings in the vast woodlands that once surrounded the hill, which by Norman times formed part of a Royal Forest extending for over 120 square miles. As with the hill itself, geology played a starring role in the fortunes of the surrounding area, where plentiful supplies of coal, ironstone and clay helped put east Shropshire at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution from the early 1700s. The formation of industrial partnerships that combined the extraction of minerals and aggregates with the production of iron, bricks and tiles created a boom that changed the fortunes of all our towns, without which several of them would not exist in their present form at all.

The Green Network

The Wrekin Hills are connected to the five towns of the former east Shropshire coalfield by the green network — an officially designated corridor of open spaces defined by their ecological value, visual quality and recreational worth. The varied nature of the industrial concerns that once blighted the local landscape have helped to create ideal conditions for its natural reclamation, resulting in the precious and varied habitats that now comprise the network. One of its most distinctive features is a nationally important series of former pit mounds that form a regular feature of the trail. Here, species-rich regenerated woodlands provide an urban refuge for mini-beasts, reptiles and insects and a colourful source of autumn berries and drupes for a varied range of local birdlife. The green network provides recreational access for over 100, 000 people and is a great way to get out in to The Wrekin Hills. Just turn to the map in the centre pages of this booklet to begin your journey into Wrekin country...

Glenn Bishton


The Wrekin is a local stronghold for the Common Redstart

Alec Connah


The Blue Pool

Find out More: The Wrekin Hills and the former east Shropshire coalfield are home to a tremendous array of natural and landscape heritage… far more than we can fit into a 20-page publication! Look out for boxes like this throughout the booklet, which contain links to sources of more detailed information that will all add to your enjoyment of the journey

THE FIVE TOWNS WREKIN TRAIL

The Wrekin's Market Town

Market Square, Wellington

Just a mile from the Forest Glen, the trail reaches the first of our five towns. Wellington, the historic capital of east Shropshire, has enjoyed close links to The Wrekin for many centuries and, after the coming of the railways, was the principal destination for thousands of visitors wishing to ascend the hill.

Bowring Park: an excellent stopping-off point between Wellington and The Wrekin

Wellington under The Wrekin

The journey from The Wrekin Hills into the leafy suburbs of Wellington presents an almost seamless transition between town and country that has long made the area popular with local people. In medieval times, the land between Holyhead Road and The Ercall was an enclosure for deer where cattle could also be grazed for most of the year. Clues to the existence of Wellington Hay, as it was known, can be seen around town in street names and pub signs: both Haygate Road and The Wickets, for example, refer to former entrances into the deer park. During the 1800s, the northern part of The Ercall and its woodlands were presented to the people of Wellington by the lord of the manor and now form part of a local nature reserve.

Links: To discover more about the natural and historic heritage of Wellington and The Wrekin, visit: **www.wellingtonla21.org.uk/discover**

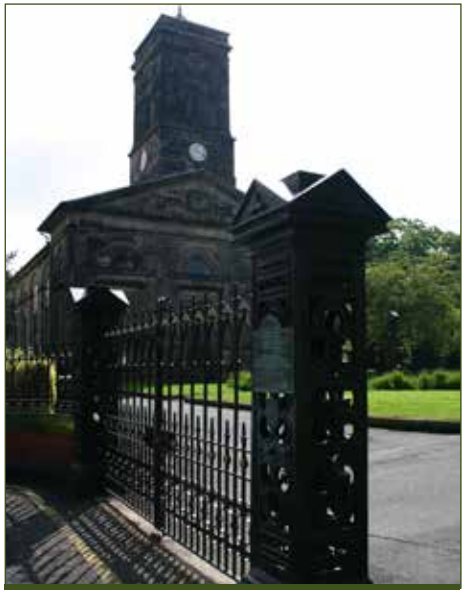
Here Come the Trains

While Wellington always enjoyed close links to The Wrekin Hills, the arrival of the railway, in June 1849, exposed the area's many charms to a much wider audience. This event was probably the biggest upheaval the town had seen since 1244, when Lord of the Manor Giles de Erdington acquired Wellington's first royal charter. Then, the settlement that had developed around All Saints church expanded southwards towards a new Market Square that quickly became the heart of the community. Evidence of these distant events still endures in the town centre, in its medieval street grid and the long, narrow interiors of many of its shops. These 'burgage tenements' were laid out after the charter and vested with special privileges in order to entice merchants to move to the fledgling town.

The Green: the historic heart of Wellington

Away Days

The arrival of the railway quite literally split Wellington in half, cutting off the Anglo-Saxon settlement around All Saints church from the medieval Market Square. However, it was more than just the physical appearance of the town that changed and, within just a few years, the whole area enjoyed an era of unprecedented prosperity thanks to its new rail links. Although the costs of travelling by train were initially expensive, developments in the second half of the 1800s, such as the introduction of cheap fares, helped many families enjoy day trips for the first time. The growth of white-collar jobs and the introduction of bank holidays gave many people more free time and this was reflected in the growth of the leisure movement, which championed activities such as cycling and walking.



All Saints Parish Church

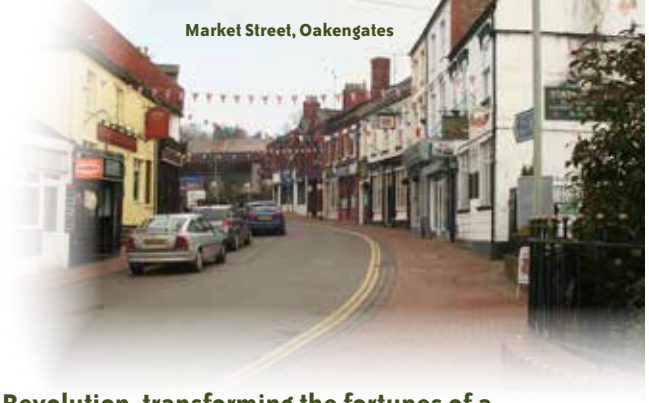
Orientation: From the Forest Glen car park, turn right into Ercall Lane and proceed to its junction with Holyhead Road. Turn right again and, after the Wickets pub, take the next left into Wrekin Road, which leads to the town centre. Cycle parking is available at a number of locations, while local tourist information can be found at Wellington Library. Spares and repairs can be purchased at Perry's Cycles, Tan Bank.

The Ercall Reservoir: it once supplied Wellington's drinking water

Halfway to the Glen

Wellington was well positioned to take advantage of the popularity of these new pastimes and rail passengers began to flock to the town in order to visit The Wrekin, hiring horses and traps from local hotels for the journey. One local businessman took advantage of rising demand by opening a refreshment room at the foot of the hill in 1889. Henry Pointon's Forest Glen Pavilion took its name from the small wooded valley between Lawrence's Hill and The Wrekin, which legend decrees was constructed by King Henry I to shorten the journey to Bridgnorth for his troops. The pavilion alone was not enough to sate the appetite of weary travellers and, further up the hill, another tea room was established. Unlike the Forest Glen, which closed in 1990, the Halfway House still serves visitors and is open for business on most weekends and bank holidays.

The Victorian New Town


Market Street, Oakengates

Beyond Wellington, the trail reaches the edge of the former east Shropshire coalfield. This area provided many of the raw materials that put the county at the forefront of Britain's Industrial Revolution, transforming the fortunes of a tiny settlement that first emerged from woodlands surrounding The Wrekin.

Dissolution to Revolution

Although the origins of modern day Oakengates are firmly rooted in the 19th Century, many of the developments that shaped the Victorian new town can be traced much further back — to the Dissolution of Monasteries in the reign of King Henry VIII. Until 1536, the vast reserves of coal and ironstone that would later prove so vital to the fortunes of the whole district lay largely undisturbed beneath the estates of St Leonard's Priory, Wombridge. Yet even the canons of this modest foundation (which began life in a clearing in Hadley Wood in 1135) had realised the value of what lay beneath their feet by the early 1500s, when they counted a smithy and two coal mines among their property.


Wombridge parish church: now occupies part of the site of St Leonard's Priory

A New Town is Born

While it would be several centuries before new technology allowed local resources to be exploited on a truly industrial scale, the Charlton family, who acquired Wombridge after the Priory's demise, would play a crucial role in the process by accommodating mines and iron foundries on their estate. It was also one of their brethren, William Charlton, who recognised the need for a commercial centre to serve the district's industrial interests and, in the early 1800s, he began developing Oakengates, which was essentially a village, as a focal point. In the end though, it was the coming of the railways, in 1849, that provided the real impetus for change. Before that date, new settlements had largely sprung-up wherever industrial activity took place but the railway had the effect of concentrating development in Oakengates itself.

Cockshutt Piece and The Nabb

On the outskirts of Oakengates, the trail passes by two of the old industrial sites developed on the Charlton family estates — Cockshutt Piece and The Nabb. As its name suggests, the Cockshutt probably began as a forest clearing where wild birds, such as Woodcock, were caught for food and feather. By 1650, it was one of the last remaining areas of woodland around Oakengates but it was quickly denuded of its trees after being leased for mining in the early 1700s, when The Nabb, a sprawling settlement of squatters' cottages and terrace housing, emerged on the edge of the site. Following the end of mining activity, in the mid 19th Century, the Lilleshall Company, which then owned the Cockshutt Piece, began a programme of replanting that ultimately led to the regeneration of the wood and heathland habitat that now makes this popular wildlife site so valuable.

A Warble in the Gorse

In the absence of industry, the disturbance to the soil created by mining activity has provided ideal conditions for Gorse, which thrives on the Cockshutt Piece and across the east Shropshire coalfield. The dense structure of this evergreen shrub offers refuge for many over-wintering invertebrates, while its lengthy flowering period makes it an important source of nectar from spring right through to early winter. Unsurprisingly, these facets also make Gorse stands popular with heath and farmland birds, not only as a source of food but also as nesting sites. As such, the Cockshutt's central heathland really comes into its own in spring and early summer when large numbers of African migrant warblers frequent the area — try listening out for the persistent 'zip zap zip' calls of resident Chiff Chaffs, or a scalding 'ved, ved, ved' from an inquisitive Common whitethroat, which are just two of many species that can be found here.

Glenn Bishton


The Cockshutt Piece

Glenn Bishton


Left: **The Common whitethroat;** *right:* **The Gorse stands of The Cockshutt are valuable breeding sites for the Linnet**

Orientation: Follow the signs for National Cycle Network Route 81 and take the inner ring road around Wellington to the railway station roundabout. Take the third exit (King Street) and then turn immediately left into Constitution Hill. Cross Wrekin College playing fields and follow the Perry Way through Hadley to Trench Lock interchange. Turn right and follow the Silkin Way to Oakengates.

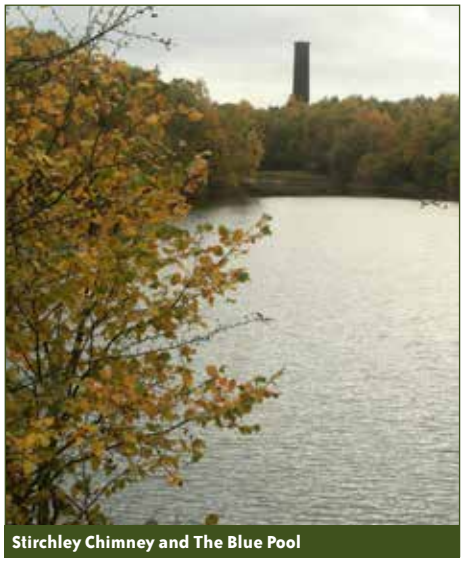
Brown Fields to Green Corridors

Town Park Local Nature Reserve, from Hinkshay

Lying between Oakengates, Dawley and Madeley are some of the most treasured tracts of the Green Network. Here, amid the relics of east Shropshire's revolutionary past, the rough edges of industry have given way to a landscape where the old spoil heaps and clay pits that once blighted the area now provide a unique habitat for local wildlife.

Nigel Jones

The Town Park grasslands are home to butterflies such as the Green Hairstreak



Stirchley Chimney and The Blue Pool

Following the Dodger

If you've decided to cycle through Oakengates you may be wondering, as you make your way up Station Hill towards the Silkin Way, where exactly the 'station' is? The name, in fact, refers to 'Oakengates Market Street', which served a short branch line that ran from Wellington to Coalport until the early 1950s. Although this circuitous route is long gone, beyond the shopping malls and office buildings south of Oakengates, the track bed is now a valuable traffic-free link to Dawley and Madeley.

The old railway is also an important wildlife corridor that forms part of an expansive local nature reserve en route between the three towns. Muck and brass have existed side by side here for many centuries and the industrial sites that once littered the district were soon re-colonised following their demise, creating a wild landscape of grass, heath and woodland that has flourished on old spoil materials associated with past mining activity.

Orientation: Follow the Silkin Way around the edge of Oakengates towards Snedshill (for an alternative route through Oakengates town centre using the road network see the centre page map). At Holyhead Road turn right, and take the next left into Central Park. After travelling under the M54 turn left into Rampart Way and right across the footbridge into Ironmasters Way. From here follow National Cycle Network Route 55 into the town park.

Blue Pools and Blood Red Bricks

Amid the greenery, the Town Park still harbours many relics of east Shropshire's industrial past, although some are rather well-disguised. The 'Blue Pool', for example, once provided raw materials for the nearby Randlay Brickworks and owes its colour to clay particles suspended in the water that now fills the former pit. The famous 'blood red' Randlay bricks were used to build Stirchley Chimney, which stands in an isolated position just south of the pool. When Oakengates and Dawley were enjoying their remarkable rise to prominence, the 209 foot edifice formed part of an extensive network of foundries, furnaces and collieries that spread out in linear fashion along the old railway — and the canal it replaced — from the late 1700s onwards. These sites were inter-connected by a maze of wagonways shipping materials and goods to and fro and their lines can easily be traced in the reserve, too.

Species-rich grassland
is one of the Town Park's key habitats

Autumn arrives at Withy Pool

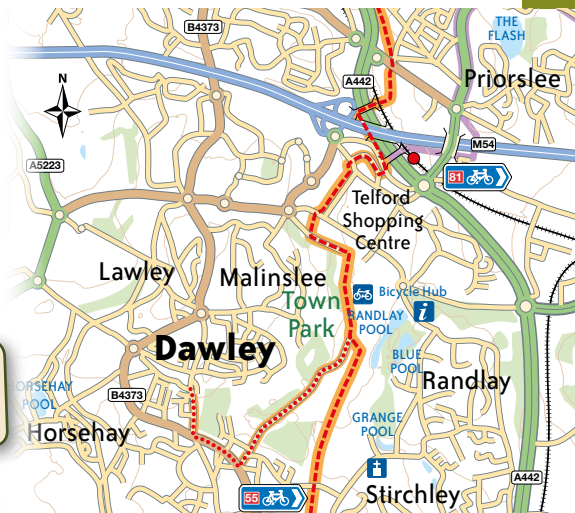
Links: To discover more about the local post-industrial landscape between Oakengates, Dawley and Madeley, visit: **www.walktelfordheritage.co.uk**

Glenn Bishton

The Willow Tit is one of several scarce British birds that have bred in the Town Park

A Park for all Seasons

The wide-ranging industrial activity that once took place within the town park has resulted in an equally diverse natural legacy, presenting the wandering cyclist with many a seasonal treat. Nowhere is this more evident than on the reserve's grasslands, which have been uniquely shaped by the chemical properties of the clay waste and coal spoil beneath them. Many species of wildflowers are present here but the purple hue of Spotted orchids in early summer are an undoubted highlight. Unsurprisingly, many species of butterfly enjoy this rich heritage, too, and spring is a good time to look for Orange-tips searching for early season nectar. The regenerated woodlands and dense thickets of the town park also offer good habitat for bird life. Autumnal sights and sounds may include garrulous Jays filling their crops with acorns, or the eerie crepuscular calls of resident male and female Tawny Owls calling to each other from the trees… kewick? Hoo!



THE FIVE TOWNS WREKIN TRAIL

- 5 Towns Route
- Alternative route
- National Cycle Network Routes
- Cycle Shop / Repairs
- Visitor Information
- Car Parking
- Museum
- Building of Historical Interest
- Youth Hostel
- Place of Worship

Orientation: Telford and Wrekin Borough is served by a range of traffic-free, family-friendly cycle routes offering a number of alternative ways of reaching The Wrekin from the five towns that can also be used to divide the trail into smaller sections. For more information visit: www.telford.gov.uk/cycling

The Coalfield Town

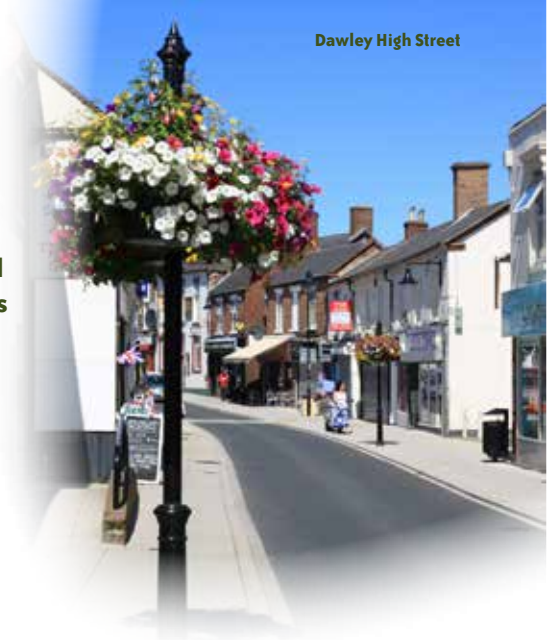
Dawley has an industrial heritage second to none in east Shropshire. By the Victorian period, it stood at the centre of a coal and iron founding dynasty that sent goods to all corners of the Earth, in an era when its links to perhaps the world's first modern sports star also put the town on the global map.

Cottage Industry

Like Oakengates, Dawley's rapid rise to town status was founded on coal and ironstone. Local deposits were mined with increasing skill from the late 16th Century, with extraction reaching its zenith in the mid 1800s, when around nine out of every ten families in the district depended on mining for their livelihoods. In the intervening period, more and more workers poured into the area, transforming medieval Dawley, the hamlet set around the local parish church and manor house — the long lost Dawley Castle — into a town of ten thousand residents. No roadside verge or scrap of wasteland was safe and by 1799 the area was 'full of cottages from one end to the other' according to one commentator, with many of the properties built by the workers themselves.

Elephant and Castle, Dawley High Street

Dawley High Street



Dawley High Street

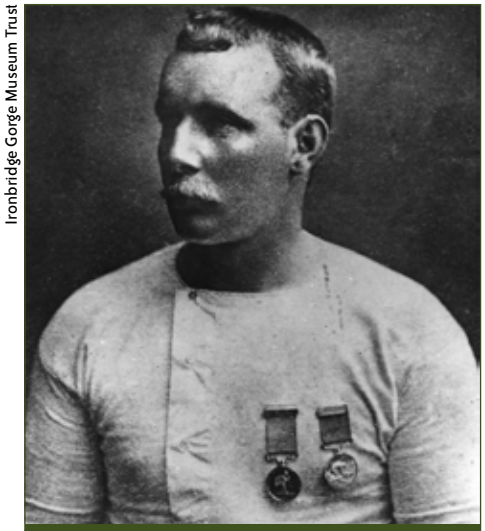
The Original Forest Town

Dawley's era of great expansion was largely responsible for shaping the town we see today: new development was bookended in the north by the populous Dawley Bank and in the south by Dawley Green, which acquired many of the trappings of a town centre by the Victorian era — when it became known by the name it still carries today: High Street. While rapid industrialisation influenced the town's modern day appearance, it also robbed the area of its ancient woodland heritage, much of which went to provide pit props and charcoal for industry. By the mid-19th Century, Dawley's natural resources were a vital ingredient in sending manufactured east Shropshire goods all round the world. However, it was a local lad born in 1848 who really put the town on a global stage…

Captain Webb the Dawley Man

"The gas was on in the Institute,
The flare was up in the gym,
A man was running a mineral line,
A lass was singing a hymn,
When Captain Webb the Dawley man,
Captain Webb from Dawley,
Came swimming along the old canal
That carried the bricks to Lawley…"

While there might not have been "a man in Oakengates that hadn't got hold of the tale" Sir John Betjeman's famous depiction of the posthumous return of "Captain Webb the Dawley man" to his hometown in *A Shropshire Lad* is (as far as we know!) pure fiction. Having said that, there is little escaping its hero's lasting presence — from street signs to office buildings, his name is almost as common as that of Dawley itself. For the uninitiated,



Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

Captain Matthew Webb: The first person to swim the Channel and a Dawley Mon!

Orientation: Dawley is located just off the main trail — to visit the town you'll need to take a breif detour. One option is to depart NCN Route 55 in the town park and follow Hinkshay Road to its junction with Finger Road and Southall Road. At the roundabout, take the third exit onto Finger Road and turn right again when you reach New Street, which leads directly to the town centre. To get back on the trail, simply retrace your steps!

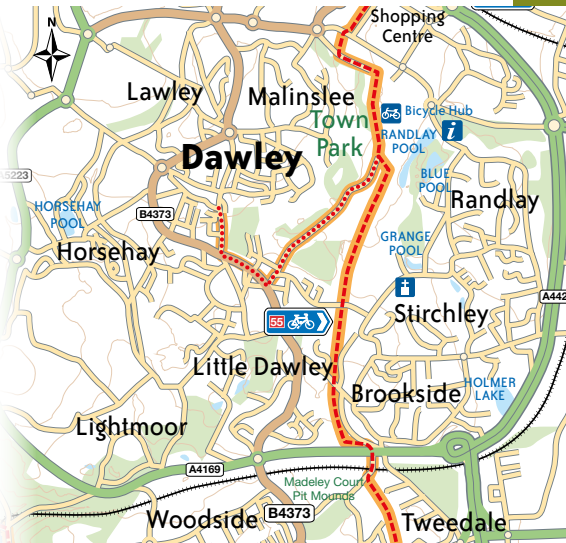
The Webb Memorial, Dawley High Street

Webb's enduring fame stems from his great feat of having been the first person to swim the English Channel, crossing from Dover to Calais in 21 hours and 45 minutes on August 24th 1875.

Nothing Great is Easy

Webb's great exploit was the culmination of a long association with water, which began in the River Severn at Coalbrookdale, where he learnt to swim at the age of seven. Following the Channel crossing, the Captain (an epithet he earned working on the Cunard line) enjoyed worldwide fame and a new career as an exhibition swimmer. He embarked on numerous tests of endurance on both sides of the Atlantic, culminating in an ill-fated attempt to swim the Niagara rapids in 1883, where he drowned, aged just 35. A memorial fountain, inscribed with the words 'nothing great is easy', stands in his honour at the end of Dawley High Street.

Links: To discover more about Dawley's heritage, and the lives of its many illustrious residents, visit: **www.dawleyheritage.co.uk**



Anstice Memorial Hall

World Heritage on your Doorstep

From the Dissolution of the Monasteries to the English Civil War, Madeley has witnessed events from some key episodes in our history. This ancient market town also has strong links to the Industrial Revolution and is the northern gateway to the Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site.

Madda's Lea

It seems probable that Madeley began its existence as a clearing in the same woodlands from which Dawley and Oakengates also emerged. Like its near neighbours, it, too, benefited from the rise of the heavy industries that gradually became east Shropshire's lifeblood from the 17th Century onwards. Yet, while those towns were practically founded on iron and coal, Madeley's origins as a local centre of note have greater antiquity. The township was first documented in 727, when it appears to have been known as Madda's Lea — perhaps in tribute to a former lord of the manor. By 736, Madeley was in the hands of the Prior of Wenlock, where it stayed until that foundation's demise in 1540, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Indeed, the priory appears to have attached considerable value to its Madeley estate and founded a deer park there in 1283 (in the vicinity of the Sutton Hill area).

Links: To discover more about Madeley's fascinating past, visit: **www.madeleylocalhistory.org** and find out about the ecology of the town's pit mounds here: **www.madeleyonthemap.co.uk**

Orientation: Follow NCN route 55 through the Town Park towards Aqueduct. After passing beneath the Queensway road, the trail bisects Madeley Court and Tweedale pit mounds before reaching the western end of Madeley High street on the line of the old Coalport railway. Cycle parking is available at Jubilee House (the parish council offices) at the junction of High Street and Court Street.

The Wheels Begin to Turn

The 13th Century seems to have been something of a golden age for Madeley, as it was in 1269 that the town was issued with its first market charter. This event inspired a period of local expansion, and houses were laid out along the line of the present High Street in a sort of medieval 'new town' development! Despite its newfound prosperity, it would be several centuries before Madeley enjoyed a genuine commercial boom. When it did come, much of the activity, unsurprisingly, centred on iron and coal, and the profitable river trade in shipping these commodities to inland ports, such as Worcester. Accordingly, most of the industry was initially located on the banks of the Severn, around Madeley Wood — the western end of which became better known as Ironbridge, in deference to the illustrious edifice constructed there between 1777 and 1780.


Jubilee House, High Street

Another Green World

Some of the most intensive activity in the coalfield took place close to the town centre in the unlikely surroundings of Madeley Court. The lands around the house, which once belonged to Wenlock Priory, were not heavily exploited until the mid-1800s, when new technology allowed for deeper seams of coal on the outskirts of Madeley to be excavated. An ironworks and a colliery comprising seventeen shafts once stood here but their prosperity proved to be short-lived and by the early 1900s the salad days were over. To screen some of the ensuing dereliction, the old pit mounds were planted with pines and Sweet chestnut trees but natural regeneration was soon underway and oak and birch species quickly emerged from the largely acidic coal spoil. Nowadays, these vertical woodlands form part of a complex wildlife site where the flora and fauna have been uniquely influenced by the varying profiles and gradients of the mounds themselves.

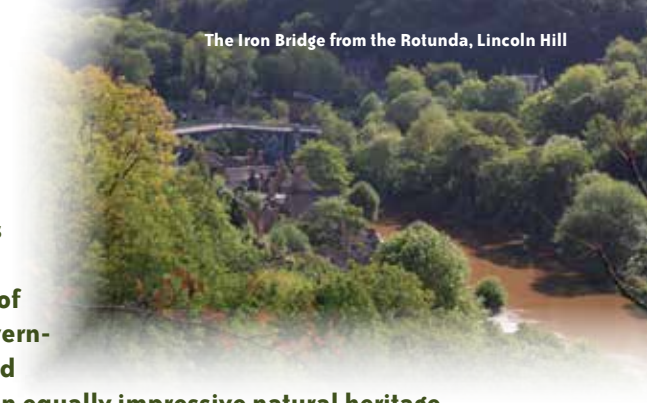

The King Charles Barn


The Fletcher family tomb


Madeley Court Gatehouse

Exploring the Past

Another prominent reminder of Madeley's industrial past is the Anstice Memorial Institute, which stands in the centre of the town. It first opened in 1868 and was erected in memory of local industrialist John Anstice, owner of the Madeley Wood Company. Anstice was renowned for taking a paternal interest in the welfare of his employees and the hall, which can hold 600 people, was once equipped with a reading room and library. The Anstice is one of many historic buildings in Madeley and a circular tour of the town reveals a heritage far beyond its industrial links. Nowhere is this more evident than in Church Street. Here, in the space of a few hundred yards, you will find Thomas Telford's parish church (erected 1796), the former home of Reverend John Fletcher, Anglican Vicar of Madeley (1760 – 1785) and one of the founding fathers of Methodism, and, just up the road, Francis Woolf's Barn, where King Charles II sought refuge as he fled the Battle of Worcester in September 1651.


The Iron Bridge from the Rotunda, Lincoln Hill

Up Hill and Down Dale

A short distance from the outskirts of Madeley, the trail reaches the edge of Ironbridge. While the last of our five towns is famed for the Severn-spanning industrial wonder around which it developed, the area has an equally impressive natural heritage.

Across the Gorge

Away from the world-famous monument that gave the town its name, Ironbridge is a gloriously anarchic jumble of narrow streets, serpentine footpaths and imposing houses that cling to the wooded valleys of the Severn Gorge for dear life. The disorderly roots of this impressive townscape lie in the many trackways that once traversed the hillside, carrying coal from local pits to riverside wharves for carriage on the Severn.


A typical Ironbridge street scene


Lodge Field Local Nature Reserve

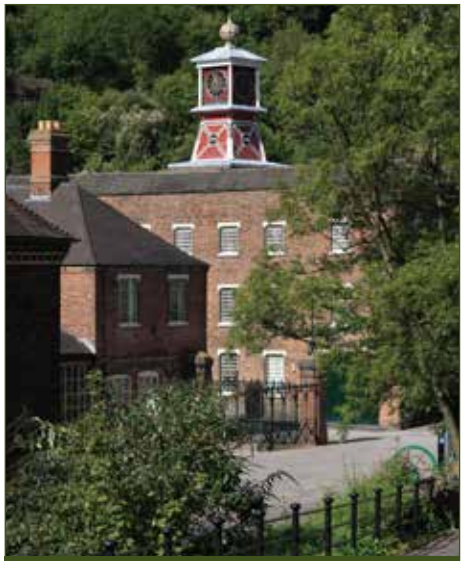
The trail passes over the top of the Gorge just at the point where town gives way to country, in the form of Lodge Field — an ancient meadow that may once have provided grazing for pit ponies. Animals continued to graze the site for many years but a recent period of disuse had begun to rob the field of its wildlife value. It has gradually been nursed back to health by the community and is now a designated local nature reserve where many wildflowers, insects and birds thrive in the open grasslands, dense scrub and boggy areas that comprise its varied topography.

Flower-rich meadows have declined alarmingly in recent times, so Lodge Field offers an increasingly rare glimpse of a vanishing habitat where pollinating insects can still feed from a wide range of beneficial plants. Its floristic interest is further enhanced by the area's many ant hills, the bare soils of which provide a warm micro climate that also benefits various mosses, lichens and fungi, which help bind the surfaces of these purpose-built artificial sun traps. Unsurprisingly, their heat retaining capabilities also attract many other insects, including grasshoppers (which use them for egg laying) basking butterflies and reptiles such as the Common lizard.

Links: To find out more about the industrial heritage of the Gorge visit: **www.ironbridge.org.uk** To learn more about the natural heritage of the area, try: **www.severngorge.co.uk**

Down the 'Dale

Travelling down Church Road into Coalbrookdale you may notice several signs pointing to 'The Rotunda'. This well-known vantage point once formed part of an elaborate network of trails through the surrounding ancient woodlands of Dale Coppice that were devised by Quaker Ironmaster Richard Reynolds as recreation for his workforce. The local iron legacy becomes more apparent further down the dale, which is dominated by the former works of the Coalbrookdale Company. It was here in 1709 that Abraham Darby first smelted iron ore with coke, a process that proved crucial to the industrialisation of Britain. Darby's original furnace (where the Iron Bridge itself was cast) can be found next to the imposing railway aqueduct that bisects this part of the valley, while the Museum of Iron, which celebrates the area's remarkable industrial heritage, is also located nearby.


The former Coalbrookdale Company Works

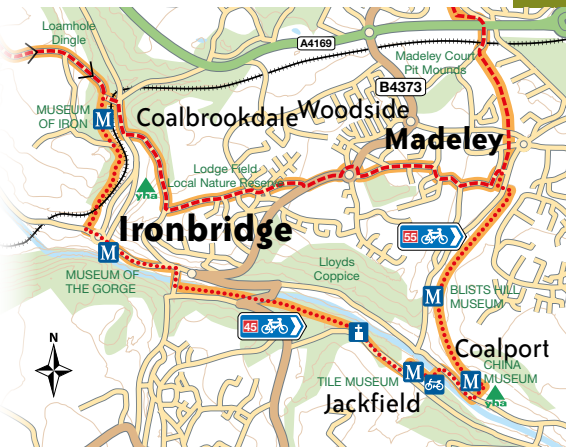
Orientation: From the Silkin Way, turn right into Station Road, Madeley and continue along Church Street. Turn left into Park Street, go straight across the roundabout into Ironbridge Road and turn right at Woodside Avenue. Take the next left into Beech Road and head towards Lincoln Hill, turning right at the White Horse Pub into Church Road (Lodge Field is located directly opposite this junction, in Lodge Lane).

Glenn Bishton


Loamhole Dingle

By the Dingle

Heading back towards The Wrekin, the landscape is characterised by deep wooded stream valleys flowing downhill towards the River Severn. The road out of Coalbrookdale is situated next to one such vale: the Loamhole Dingle — which in turn merges seamlessly into the larger Lydebrook Dingle. Owing to their ability to support specialist insects that breed in the woody debris found on valley floors, such as *Lipsothrix nigristigmata* (the Telford crane fly!) these secluded habitats are of national conservation interest. While you might have trouble identifying any of the area's shadier inhabitants from the saddle, the Loamhole is also home to more visible avian residents, including Grey wagtail, which can be seen from the bridge near its southern entrance during spring and summer. If the Severn is in flood you may also see Kingfishers moving into the Dingle when fishing becomes more difficult downstream.




The Ercall Local Nature Reserve

In the Footsteps of Giants

With the last of the five towns behind us, the trail comes full circle in The Wrekin Hills. This stunning landscape is recognised as part of the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty but this is just one facet of an enduring appeal stretching back thousands of years.


The Wrekin: myths, legends and superstitions abound!


A trip to The Wrekin is always a moo-ving experience

Lucky Country

As the trail emerges from the Severn Valley, familiar landmarks atop The Wrekin begin to come back into view. Myths and legends abound when it comes to explaining the formation of these rocky outcrops, most of which seem to involve a malevolent giant with a long standing grudge against humanity! Both the Needle's Eye and the Raven's Bowl are the subject of many superstitions, and dropping a pin in the latter, a small rainwater-filled depression in the rock itself, is thought to be particularly lucky!

Not all the hill's distinguishing features are natural however. Until Roman times, The Wrekin was a principal hillfort of a Celtic tribe – the Cornovii – and many ramparts and ditches associated with the ancient monument can be seen encircling the summit, access to which is gained via two of the structure's former entrances: Heaven Gate and Hell Gate. Evidence suggests the walls of the hillfort were begun around 450BC, and it appears to have remained in use until AD 47, when the all-conquering Roman army reached the area and established a new local centre at Wroxeter: Viroconium Cornoviorum.

Orientation: In Coalbrookdale, turn right at the bottom of Church Road into Wellington Road — this junction is situated on a blind bend, so take great care while crossing the highway! Take the second left into Darby Road (to visit the Museum of Iron, turn left directly after the viaduct). Above Lydebrook Dingle turn left at the next junction for Little Wenlock. At the end of Church Lane, turn left into Wellington Road and head for The Wrekin!


The Ercall

Written in the Heart

A thousand years ago the woodlands around The Wrekin formed part of a vast royal hunting forest that was as important to the Crown for the revenue it raised from locals as it was for the food and timber it supplied. This long-standing economic connection is reflected by the presence of numerous coppice trees, which are the result of continuous cutting back over many generations, in order to provide charcoal for local furnaces. Remnants of other distant industrial activity can also be traced around The Hatch and in Limekiln Wood — where old mine workings have developed a new purpose as roost sites for bats. Despite the upheaval, The Wrekin Forest has a rich botanical heritage typical of ancient woodland, denoted by the presence of plants unlikely to have been introduced by human hand. The Ercall Woods are an especially good place to enjoy this legacy, being noted for colourful springtime displays of Wood anemone, Bluebells and Wood sorrel.

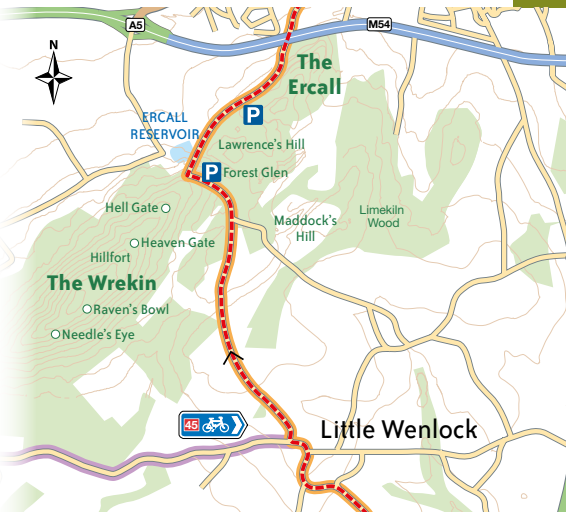

In the Ercall Woods

Best of Both Worlds

Cycling in The Wrekin Hills, it's easy to appreciate the area's ancient woodland heritage. Yet, beyond this arboreous legacy, there lies a mosaic landscape of varied and increasingly scarce habitats that are home to some equally rare wildlife. The summit of The Wrekin itself is just one such place, and here, within the ramparts of the hillfort, you can gaze upon a heathland landscape of grasses and dwarf shrubs, such as heather and bilberry, that has vanished from much of the countryside. In fact, while they might not seem that unusual, the arable fields and pasture that surround The Wrekin also have great wildlife value. Here, classic farmland birds like the Skylark, which has declined rapidly in areas where mixed farming no longer predominates, can still be found in good numbers, along with Yellowhammer, which nest in the short, thick hedgerows that are a characteristic feature of the area.

Glenn Bishton


The Yellowhammer: a little bit of bread but definitely no cheese!



THE WREKIN HILLS