



# Rutland Discovery Trails

## 3. Royal Forest Trail

Once there was a large forest on the borders of Rutland called the Royal Forest of Leighfield. Now only traces remain, like Prior's Coppice, near Leighfield Lodge. The plentiful hedgerows and small fields in the area also give hints about the past vegetation cover. Villages, like Belton and Braunston, once deeply situated in the forest, are square shaped. This is considered to be due to their origin as enclosures within the forest where the first houses surrounded an open space into which animals could be driven for their protection and greater security - rather like the covered wagon circle in the American West. This eventually produced a 'hollow-centred' village later filled in by buildings. In Braunston the process of filling in the centre had been going on for many centuries.

Ridlington betrays its forest proximity by its 'dead-end' road, continued only by farm tracks today. The forest blocked entry in this direction. Indeed, if you look at the 2 ½ inch O.S map you will notice that there are no through roads between Belton and Braunston due to the forest acting as a physical administrative barrier.

To find out more about this area, follow this trail... You can **start in Oakham, going west out of town on the Cold Overton Road, then 2<sup>nd</sup> left onto West Road towards Braunston.** Going up the hill to Braunston. In Braunston, walk around to see the old buildings such as Cheseldyn Farm and Quaintree Hall; go down to the charming little bridge over the River Gwash (the stream flowing into Rutland Water). Into the churchyard to find the pagan idol below the west tower and then, if time allows, follow the river by taking the gate out of the churchyard.

**Make for Brooke**, a tiny village just a few miles away. Into the church, one of Rutland's gems, to look for the interesting font lid in carved oak, plus Henry Rawlins and his wives buried beneath floor slabs. Find the graffiti on the pews and the marble tomb of Charles Noel. This old church was rebuilt in 1579 which gives it a special rarity, it was also used in the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The grassy paths and quietness render the churchyard one of Rutland's loveliest.

**On to Ridlington** on a ridge over the Chater Valley. Look for the old musical instruments displayed in St. Mary and Andrew's Church. *Ayston*, just around the corner, once quiet, now lies next to the busy A47 by-pass of Uppingham. However, it still retains its charm with the Hall, the church and its few brown-stone cottages all close by. It is almost impossible to believe that Edward I, King of England, once stayed here.



**Follow the sign to *Preston*, left towards *Oakham* on *A6003*** with its harmonious beauty and serenity, though again, the busy road rumbles less than 200 yards away. *Preston* church has relics from the Holy Land both inside and outside and there are fine yews in the churchyard. Look for the 17<sup>th</sup> century Manor House in the village and the converted schoolhouse.

**A few miles away, in the direction of *Oakham*, you can stray into *Manton*.** With a great pub and eccentric *St Mary's* church. Look for the 'eye of the needle window'. Not far away, across the fields there is a pleasant walk to the lost village of *Martinsthorpe* where a lonely shepherd's house is all that remains. The views towards *Rutland Water* and *Burley-on-the-Hill* are glorious, especially in late evening. Once the main road passed through *Martinsthorpe* but now it has migrated to the east as the busy *A6003*.

**Continue to *Oakham*** but if you had time, make the short diversion to *Egleton*, on the edge of *Rutland Water*, where you will find the excellent *Anglian Water Birdwatching Centre*. See the remarkable south door in the church and look for the inscription on the former school as a reminder that not so long ago the *Finch* family owned this village.

**Go back the way you came on to the main road, and then take a left to *Oakham*.** When you see a sign indicating 'Mount Pleasant' you're now passing the site where the gallows used to reside, and just after is the *Swooning Bridge*, where ladies were overtaken by the vapours on seeing bodies hanging from the gibbet. Further on is *Rutland County Museum*, formerly the riding school for the cavalry regiment of *Rutland* – the *Rutland Fencibles*. Did its fine old beams come from *Leighfield Forest*? Well before the 18<sup>th</sup> century most of the *Forest* had gone. Now we can only search for traces and clues in landscape and in documents but although many people would never realize that they were in the shadow of a great forest you will always know it when **you have completed this *Royal Forest Trail*.**

#### **Useful Contact Information:**

**Priors Coppice:** OS map ref: SK 832051 [www.lrwt.org.uk](http://www.lrwt.org.uk)

The reserve is situated south of *Braunston* village near *Oakham*, in the county of *Rutland*. From *Braunston* take the road towards *Leighfield*. After negotiating a sharp left hand bend at the top of the hill take the next right turn, sign-posted to *Leighfield Lodge*. Proceed another 800m and you will see the reserve car park on the right, just before a gate across the road.

**The Horse & Jockey**, *Manton*: 01572 737335 [www.horseandjockeyrutland.co.uk](http://www.horseandjockeyrutland.co.uk)  
Serving great food every day at this popular county inn full of charm and character.

**Anglian Water Birdwatching Centre**, *Egleton*: 01572 770651 Find out all about the birds and wildlife found around the reservoir. [www.anglianwater.co.uk](http://www.anglianwater.co.uk)

**Rutland County Museum**, *Oakham*: 01572 758440 [www.rutland.gov.uk/museum](http://www.rutland.gov.uk/museum)  
An interesting building with curious exhibits and seasonal exhibitions, an excellent introduction to *Rutland*. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

