

# RUTLAND HERITAGE TRAIL

# FORESTS, MONKS

FROM BRAUNSTON TO CALDECOTT, LAUNDE TO LYDDINGTON, MUCH OF THE SOUTH-WEST OF RUTLAND WAS, DURING THE MEDIEVAL AGES, COVERED BY THE ANCIENT ROYAL FOREST OF LEIGHFIELD.

**DISTANCE:** 5 miles.

**START & FINISH:** Parish Church of All Saints, Braunston.

**TERRAIN:** Mixture of footpaths and metalled road. Some uphill stretches.

**REFRESHMENTS:** The Blue Ball, Braunston.

**MAP DETAILS:** This route is covered by the Ordnance Survey Explorer Series Number 15 (234).

Spanning the river valleys of the Chater and the Gwash and containing the villages of Braunston, Belton and the now lost Leighfield, the Leighfield Forest was the remnant of the much larger Forest of Rutland.

The forest was also home to a religious order. In Brooke, a small priory of Augustinian canons was established, whilst at Braunston there is evidence of much earlier pagan beliefs.

## THE ROYAL FOREST OF LEIGHFIELD

During the Middle Ages, large areas of land (not always completely wooded) were set aside as royal hunting grounds. The forests were protected by strict laws and forest officials appointed to govern them.

In Rutland, a large royal forest was established soon after the Norman Conquest. It covered most of the southern half of the modern county, along with a narrow strip of western Leicestershire. By the end of the 15th century however, the Forest of Rutland had shrunk considerably in size. The remaining forest (from Braunston to Caldecott and from Launde to Lyddington) became known as Leighfield Forest, and remained in use until the middle of the 17th century. It was finally disafforested (the forest laws repealed) in around 1630.

Today, most of the trees have disappeared. Only a small remnant of the ancient forest (Prior's Coppice), the parish name and the Leigh, Lambley and Cottage Lodges survive to remind us of the Royal Forest of Leighfield.





# AND PAGANS

## THE WALK

Starting in Braunston, from **All Saints'** parish church, head out of the village via Wood Lane, passing the weir on your left and the late 16th century Hall Farmhouse to the right.

Follow the road for about a quarter of a mile until the road bends sharply to the left. Take the dead-end track straight ahead, following it past some farm buildings until you reach a footpath marked to the left. Go through the kissing gate and head diagonally across the field to the hedge-line opposite.

Pass through another kissing gate and footbridge here and walk across this next field towards the edge of **Prior's Coppice**. Pass over a stile. Keeping the trees on your left, start to climb uphill skirting the wood. As the ground starts to level out and you reach a stony farm road, great views of the valley will appear ahead of you.

Cross straight over the farm road to the footpath marked straight ahead. Keeping the hedge to the right, walk downhill until you reach another farm road. Follow this straight ahead. A few yards past a tree plantation, a footpath is marked on the left, leading across the field. Stay on the stone farm road (by permission of Wills Estate) heading round to the left. As the road bends, another road straight ahead is marked as strictly private.

You are now approaching Leigh or Leighfield Lodge, a collection of many interesting buildings – including a late 16th century large stone house, a stone and brick barn (notice the triangular ventilation holes) and the decorative octagonal building in the gardens to the right. The Lodge is place-name evidence for the Leighfield 'town' that once existed in the medieval forest.



Leigh Lodge circa 1910 from the Jack Hart Collection at Rutland County Museum





# RUTLAND HERITAGE TRAIL



## THE WALK (CONTINUED...)

Alongside the main buildings of Leigh Lodge you will come to a signpost indicating a bridleway to the left and right. If you wish to see the remains of the medieval fishponds and the 16th century house, take a short detour on the right-hand road leading round the back of the buildings. As the road dips, the River Chater meanders through the fields either side, with slight earthworks to the left and an ornamental pond to the right.

Return to the signpost and head left, uphill along the tarmac farm road. A steady climb will bring you to a gateway, flanked by stone pillars, with farm buildings and Leigh Lodge Cottages on the right and **Prior's Coppice** on the left.

Continue along the roadway, now open to cars, through another pair of stone gate pillars and along to the highway. There are good views across to Braunston on your left.

When you reach the roadway, turn right and walk along it until you reach a junction (just under half a mile). Here take the left-hand turn (signposted for Brooke) and head down into the village.

Our route is to the left, but why not take some time to visit **St Peter's Church**, a short way to the right. Used in the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, it's one of Rutland's smallest churches.

## PRIOR'S COPPICE

The only substantial remains of the medieval forest, **Prior's Coppice** is now a Nature Reserve run by the **Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust**. Visitors are welcome to explore the various paths in the wood.



## ST PETER'S CHURCH, BROOKE

Although the small parish church of St Peter was (unusually) rebuilt during the reign of Elizabeth I, much remains of the earlier Norman building. The low plain tower dates from the 13th century, but you enter through a fine zigzag archway and the north arcade has three Norman arches.

There is much to see inside the church – from the medieval wooden chest to the 12th century font and the Elizabethan oak screen.







## THE WALK (CONTINUED...)

Follow the road to the left. Once past the last house of the village, you will start to notice substantial earthworks in the fields on your right. These are thought to be the remains of the medieval priory and the later Noel house and gardens that once stood here.

On the sharp right bend, take the footpath that runs the other side of the hedge and parallel with the road, passing Town Park Farm on your left until the buildings of the present-day Brooke Priory come into view on the right. The path turns left here and skirts the field with the hedge on your right. Head towards the far end of the field, where you cross the waters by way of a footbridge on your right then onto a stile that takes you out onto a wide green lane.

Cross the lane and over the stile opposite and heading to the left make for another stile in the hedge-line. Once over the stile turn to the right, following the grass strip along the hedge-line. As you continue, with the **River Chater** to your right, you will come to another stile into another field. Continue through this field – the sewage works can be seen and heard (but hopefully not smelt!) to the right.

Continue straight ahead now, through the field gateways, until you can see the houses of Braunston ahead and to the right of you. In the final field, head for the right-hand corner, where a stepping stone will take you over a small stream and then a fence into Panter's Lane. This is a right of way leading past back gardens and along a driveway to take you back into Braunston, emerging opposite the church.

Cross the small bridge over the **River Gwash** to return to your starting point. You may now wish to explore 12th century **All Saints' Church** before enjoying the refreshments offered at the village pub, **The Blue Ball**.

## BROOKE PRIORY

A small priory of Augustinian Canons, a dependent house or cell of the abbey at Kenilworth, was founded at Brooke in the mid-1100s. Today, 'Brooke Priory' is a much later brick house. It incorporates some remains of the mansion built on the medieval priory site when the parish was bought by the Noel family in 1549. In the gardens, there is an octagonal dovecote which was once the Porter's Lodge. A medieval 'reliquary' (a casket for religious objects) was found in the modern **Brooke Priory** in 1805. It is now on display at **Rutland County Museum** in Oakham.

## THE BRAUNSTON SHEELA-NA-GIG

Outside Braunston's parish church, alongside the wall of its western tower, stands a small stone carving of a naked woman with prominent features. What its history is no-one knows, but it's believed to be a 'sheela-na-gig', an ancient pagan fertility symbol, possibly indicating that the church was built on an ancient pagan site. Until 1920, this pagan idol was being used as a step with its features face down.



## SAFER WALKING

- Be prepared – wear suitable clothing and sturdy footwear, take refreshments and directions.
- Respect the countryside – take care in crops and be considerate of livestock.
- Take care when crossing or walking on roadways and walk facing oncoming traffic.
- Fasten all gates, keep dogs under close control and guard against fire.
- Please show consideration to village residents by parking cars responsibly and making sure all dog mess is appropriately cleared away.
- Remember to take nothing but photos and leave nothing but footprints!

