

ALL ABOUT

RIDGE WOOD

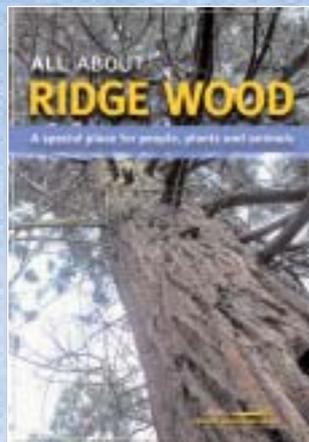
A special place for people, plants and animals

The Friends of Ridge Wood and South Gloucestershire Council would like to thank:



Ridge Wood - Spring 2003.

- ▶ **Sharon Ubank** (*Historical research and original text*)
- ▶ **The Countryside Agency** (*Aggregates Levy Team - Bristol*)
- ▶ **Hanson Aggregates**
- ▶ **Yate Heritage Centre**
- ▶ **Yate Oral History Project**
- ▶ **Avon Gardens Trust**
- ▶ **Ruth Coleman** (*Project editor*)
- ▶ **Yate Town Council**
- ▶ **Avon Wildlife Trust** (*Southwold Group*)
- ▶ **Sodbury Town Council**
- ▶ **Filton Library**
- ▶ **Forest of Avon**



Cover photograph: © Countryside Agency - Rob Fraser

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RIDGE WOOD TODAY



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INTRODUCTION

Ridge Wood occupies the southern end of a long sweep of carboniferous limestone. The Ridge rises at Chipping Sodbury in the south and extends towards Wickwar in the north. The Wood itself lies in Chipping Sodbury, the high ground it stands on marking the boundary between Chipping Sodbury and Yate.

The Ridge has been important to local people for millennia. There is evidence of an Iron Age camp established at the highest point. The area was also known to the Romans. Centuries of farming and quarrying that would leave its mark on the landscape followed.

A fine mansion, Ridge House, was built at the same high point in the late 18th century. It was surrounded by 'pleasure gardens' and planted with parkland trees that still make a dramatic impact on the skyline. Demolished in the 1960s, Ridge House made way for the modern office building that occupies the site today.



Spring 2003.



Spring 2003.

Now Ridge Wood has become important to local people and wildlife. Practical action is being taken to preserve and enhance this special place for all who go there.

This booklet has been prepared to set out the history of this unusual Wood and to outline plans for its care and future management.



RIDGE WOOD, 1777



Extract from Issac Taylors map of 1777.



EARLY HISTORY

THE IRON AGE

From the earliest times, this ridge of high land has been important for the people who have lived here. There is evidence to suggest that a number of camps were established along The Ridge during the Iron Age (hill forts first began to appear in this country from around 1000 BC).



It could be that our Celtic ancestors were responsible for clearing the trees and opening up the view.

On Isaac Taylor's map of 1777, you can see that a camp stood in Ridge Wood, close to the site now occupied by Hanson's headquarters. Its position is interesting as it appears to line up with the Little Sodbury Iron Age camp that can be found on the Cotswold edge to the east of our area. It would seem that from its earliest days, the height of The Ridge was exploited for defence purposes.

Because good visibility was obviously the main requirement for such a camp, the summit of The Ridge was at this time probably fairly open in character - it

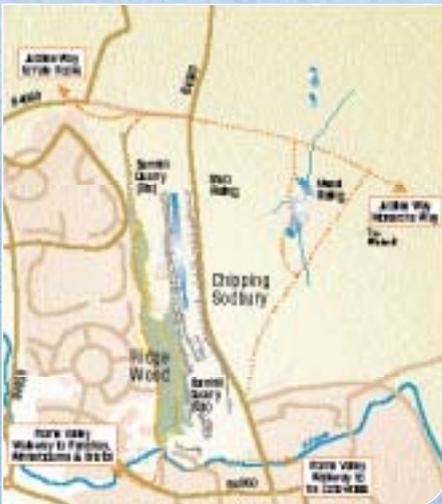
THE ROMANS

The Romans were also active in this area. In "Part of the Continuing Story of the Sodburys", the local historian, Percy Couzens, describes how shards of Roman pottery were discovered at the quarry of Messrs Wilson and Turner which was situated about a mile from Chipping Sodbury along the line of The Ridge. The remains were identified as Samian ware. A large number of Roman coins were found at another settlement established on The Ridge.



FORESTS PAST AND PRESENT

For centuries, the royal Kingswood Forest dominated the South Gloucestershire landscape. Yate marked its north-easterly extent. It is therefore possible that Ridge Wood served as a kind of border and gateway to the forest land. In medieval times, The Ridge stood at the edge of Stanshawes Manor. The name of this Manor reveals much about its location as it indicates areas of small woodland growing on a stony terrain - a description that still holds true for Ridge Wood today.



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It is interesting to note that Ridge Wood now serves as a gateway to a more modern project - the Forest of Avon Community Forest. Being identified as a gateway site means that it will be managed and improved with help from local people to create easy access and a pleasant environment for all visitors.

In addition, there are plans to improve the paths that connect with Ridge Wood to increase the opportunities for exploring the surrounding area. These paths include the Frome Valley Walkway, Jubilee Way, Monarch's Way and other local routes.

▷ THE FOREST OF AVON

The Forest of Avon is a long-term initiative that aims to transform the landscape in and around Bristol by increasing the number of woodlands, footpaths, nature areas and other places where people can enjoy open space, fresh air and the countryside. The Forest is being realised by South Gloucestershire Council and other partner organisations. For more information on the Forest of Avon and gateway sites please phone **0117 953 2141** or visit **www.forestofavon.org**



RIDGE HOUSE

It is astonishing to think that a splendid mansion house occupied roughly the same site as the Iron Age camp marked on Isaac Taylor's map (page 6) until the 1960s. Unfortunately, few photographs or records of the House and gardens exist and memories of it are few and far between.

The year in which the House first appeared is as yet unknown. That it is not included on the 1777 map does not necessarily indicate its absence in the landscape. It could simply be that the map does not show the area in sufficient detail to include it.

The architecture of Ridge House suggests a building established in the late 18th or early 19th century. But this is not conclusive either. We may be looking at the renovation or the complete rebuilding of an earlier

residence. It is interesting to note that the style of the House is similar to that of other large houses in the area - Yate House and Yate's former rectory (now occupied by Canterbury Close). These residences were built towards the end of the 18th century.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1881 (page 12) shows the house and pleasure gardens. It also seems to indicate a general absence of woodland in the area at this time.



Photograph courtesy of Yate Heritage Centre.



THE DEMISE OF RIDGE HOUSE

Ridge House, or part of it, is believed to have been used as a school during the early years of the 20th century. This would have been one of its last uses. By the 1920s, the neighbouring quarry was making life noisy for the Burges family who lived there at the time. They moved and the House was left empty, although the family who occupied the Lodge continued to use the gardens for commercial purposes.



Photograph courtesy of Hanson Aggregates.

In 1925, the quarry company J Arnold & Son acquired the House and used it as office space. Later, ARC took possession of the quarry site and

adopted the premises as their headquarters. The quarrying was getting too close for comfort, however. By the early 1960s, the House was boarded up. Eventually, it was demolished and replaced by Hanson Aggregates' modern office building that stands there today. It inherits a rich legacy.

“*It was reported that, following blasting operations, rocks would fall through the roof.*”



THE OCCUPANTS

Several interesting families lived at Ridge House. The Burges family followed the Sturges and the Neales and were the last people to live there.

Edward Burges, a successful solicitor, moved to the house in 1868. His family made an important contribution to local civic life. His nephew, Daniel, received the Victoria Cross for bravery in World War One. Edward was succeeded by his son, Colonel William Edward Parry Burges who was awarded the OBE for recruiting and training the 12th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment in readiness for World War I.

The Colonel's daughters, Olivia and Joyce, were acquainted with the Baden Powells who started the scout movement and were inspired to start their own troop in Chipping Sodbury. The troop met at Ridge House where Colonel Burges initiated the conscripts into the mysteries of map-reading. When World War I broke out, the scouts were enlisted as official messengers and

▷ HA HA

Ha has (or sunken fence) are a common feature to be found in the gardens of stately homes. They usually consist of a sunken wall with its top at ground level, with a ditch on the outer side. The idea was to stop cattle getting into the gardens whilst not spoiling the view. The remains of a ha ha associated with the old Ridge House can still be found within the wood.



Dogs Mercury - Spring 2003.

had to be available during both day and night. Their contribution to the war effort was taken very seriously.

Joyce Burges was a talented artist. She became friendly with the children's writer Violet Needham, and illustrated a number of her books.



RIDGE WOOD 1881



RIDGE HOUSE - THE GARDENS

Those who inhabited Ridge House during the early 19th century were farmers. Much of the land they farmed has been quarried so it is difficult to visualise the countryside they knew. It is likely though, that Ridge Wood was not so extensive as it is now. To the south stands an area of what is likely to have been ancient woodland but the remainder may have been dominated by agriculture and the 'pleasure gardens' belonging to the House. The gardens took the form of a shady woodland enhanced by terraced lawns and glass houses.

The Woods were also unlikely to have been so dense when the House was occupied. It only takes a short time for saplings to invade a neglected patch of land to form a new woodland. As bluebells and other native woodland flowers can be found throughout Ridge Wood, it seems that the plants that occupied the small area of ancient woodland were able to spread into the surrounding wood when it was no longer used for farming. Either that, or they were encouraged by human agents.



Photograph courtesy of Yate Heritage Centre.



Photograph courtesy of Yate Heritage Centre.

There is a mysterious part of the Wood where an ornamental standing stone seems to guard the woodland floor. It was probably erected as part of the landscaping of the pleasure gardens but perhaps the choice of its location is significant, for it stands close to the site of the Iron Age camp. In this area, it is also possible to see remnants of the terracing which was necessary for a garden on such a hilly site. In the spring, this area is dominated by



RIDGE HOUSE - THE GARDENS

colourful flowers such as *Anemone blanda* in beautiful shades of mauve, blue and white.

At one time, the driveway to the house was flanked by daffodils. The terraced lawns close to the house were interconnected with sweeps of elegant stone stairways, similar to the steps that can still be seen embellishing the lawns of Ashton Court Mansion today. The steep slopes between the lawns were planted with a lush variety of attractive shrubs and herbaceous plants.



Anemone blanda - Spring 2003.

The Field family served as gardeners to Ridge House, living in the nearby Lodge. Ernest Field, the son of the gardener, wrote an article about his experiences there in which he describes a conservatory, an orchid house and a vinery. This was obviously a high-maintenance garden!



Bluebells - Spring 2003.

As you walk through Ridge Wood today, the limestone faces that you occasionally encounter suggest an ornamental garden. Much has vanished with the passing of time, but hidden beneath the deep shade of the trees it is still possible to discern a little of what lay here in the past.

▷ SPRING

The best time of year to visit Ridge Wood is the spring. The native woodland flowers, such as bluebells, anemones, campion, stitchwort and moschatel create a spectacle of colour between March and May. The daffodils and other bulbs that are remnants of formal planting can also be seen at their peak.



THE PARKLAND TREES

T The most distinctive landscape features at Ridge Wood are the huge Wellingtonias that tower above the canopy. A study of their history throws some light on the main era of planting in these gardens.

Also known as the giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*), this species originates from a sequence of small groves that inhabit the western edge of the southern Sierra Nevada in California. They were 'discovered' by Europeans in 1852. This was the era of the great movement westward across America which is remembered as the Gold Rush. Shortly after their discovery, they were introduced into Britain.

The first plantations were established in Hampshire in 1857, on the estate belonging to the Duke of Wellington which explains the tree's popular name.

It swiftly became a fashionable plant for large estates, and specimens were planted across the country, all within a short space of time.

Wellingtonias responded favourably to their new environment and within 90 years were being recorded across the country as the largest trees in the landscape. And they had staying power. They rarely blew down during high winds. Their great height did make them vulnerable to lightning strikes but such attacks did not destroy them. They would just continue to grow with a slightly altered profile.



Ridge Wood - Spring 2003.



THE PARKLAND TREES

They are covered with a thick, spongy bark which helps to protect them from fire - a definite asset in their hot, dry Californian homeland. This bark has proved to be beneficial to our native wildlife. Tree creepers peck at their thick, fibrous bark in search of food.

A Wellingtonia recently felled in Ridge Wood appears, by a count of its rings, to have been planted during the latter years of the 19th century. The time when this plant was introduced to this country tallies with this and strongly suggests that it was the Burges family who were responsible for the establishment of the species in this area.

As you go north on the footpath through the Wood, the ground rises to provide glimpses of the view to the west over Yate. There you will see other specimens of Wellingtonia, at much the same stage of maturity. They are particularly numerous near the parish church of St Mary's. Pictures of the old rectory (which for a time was known as



Corsican Pine - Spring 2003.

Poole Court although it was not the same building as the one we know today), reveal that these trees stood in what were obviously beautifully landscaped grounds. Like Ridge House, it was adorned with terraced lawns so it is possible that there is a link between the establishment of both these gardens. Wellingtonia trees also stand in the grounds of The Lawns on the road approaching the church.

Other ornamental trees grace Ridge Wood. Conifers include the dramatic Deodar cedar which was introduced into this country in 1831, and the Corsican pine. Established deciduous trees are oak, ash, field maple and common lime.

“ Many Wellingtonias were brought to this country on the S.S. Great Britain. ”



ALSO OF INTEREST...

RIDGEWOOD CENTRE

The Ridgewood Centre on Station Road originally served as Chipping Sodbury's workhouse. Until well into the 20th century, a huge hollow oak stood next to it. It was used by tramps to store their possessions before entering the confines of the workhouse. A local legend refers to this oak as the very last tree of the great Kingswood Forest!

THE LODGE



The lodge - Spring 2003.

The Lodge is a beautiful timbered building that stands opposite The Ridgewood Centre, guarding the entrance to the grounds of Ridge House. It was built in 1883 following a trip that Colonel Burges made to Switzerland. Whilst there, he developed a fondness for picturesque cottages and decided to create something similar on his own land. Two huge Wellingtonia trees still stand sentry beside it.

THE AVENUE OF WALNUTS



Howard Lewis Park, Yate - Spring 2003.

At one time, an avenue of walnut trees flanked the drive that led from the Lodge to Ridge House. Fragments of this avenue still remain today. To find the trees, walk behind the crescent of shops on The Ridge housing estate and continue past the primary schools that stand nearby. You will then reach a small area of open space, known as Howard Lewis Park. Here the walnut trees provide welcome shade in the summer.

At the other end of the park, it is possible to see other walnut trees in both Figrove Crescent and Melrose Avenue. It is possible to visualise the sweeping line that the complete avenue of these trees must have made as it climbed to the entrance of the House.



QUARRYING

The Ridge is formed from limestones, mudstones and sandstones of the Carboniferous age. Fossils are frequently found in it. The good physical properties of the stone have encouraged quarrying throughout the local area for at least the last 200 years and it is likely that this practice was carried out as far back as the Middle Ages.

There was once a series of quarries all along the Wickwar-Chipping Sodbury Road. Most have long since been worked out. There is also evidence of quarrying at nearby Yate Rocks and Bury Hill. The name given to Limekiln Lane is another indicator of quarrying activity.

BARNHILL QUARRY

Records show that there was a limestone quarry and lime kiln on Barn Hill by 1859. The quarry covered “11 acres, 2 rods and 7 perches”. By the late 19th century, the Barnhill Quarry that we know today, in its position south of Love Lane, was being worked for the first time. By 1929, the British Quarrying Company (later ARC) had acquired the site. The Quarry formed the headquarters for ARC which became the largest stone company in the world.



Photograph courtesy of Hanson Aggregates.

By 1958, Barnhill Quarry was close to exhaustion. The entire plant was moved to a new site, this time at Southfields Quarry, just north of Love Lane. Hanson Aggregates now manage quarrying operations in this area.

To view the length of Barnhill Quarry from Peg Hill is to gaze upon an extraordinary gorge-like landscape. It has now been completely worked out and remains as an enormous legacy to past industry - over a kilometre long, 200 metres wide and, in places, 45 metres deep.

Quarrying has undoubtedly dramatically altered the shape of the land, yet it has given something back for what it has taken. Barnhill Quarry is now designated as being of regional importance geologically. Of particular significance is a section of limestone pavement, which is recognised as a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest).



Productus Giganteus - a huge fossil of this type was found at Ridge Wood in the 1920s.





Photograph courtesy of Hanson Aggregates.

ROAD-BUILDING

Quarrying rose in importance from the early 19th century as the road-building industry began to develop. This brought many economic benefits to Chipping Sodbury which profited as a 'transport town'. Pack horses and mule trains carried coal and lime to destinations as far away as Berkshire, though were soon replaced by a more efficient form of transport - the railways. By the 1920s, the railways were particularly busy, though huge quantities of stone still had to be taken to the railway line by horse-drawn cart.

From 1844, the men at the nearby workhouse (now The Ridgewood Centre) were conscripted to work for the quarry. Their task was to break down the stones into pieces small enough to fit into their mouths, employing huge hammers and axes for this purpose. This stone was then used to build or mend the local roads. Each man was expected to break several hundredweight of stones every day.



During the 20th century, quarrying became the dominant source of employment for the area. After World War I, the demand for the limestone it produced greatly increased as the building of roads accelerated.

FOODSTUFFS, FERTILIZERS AND BLUE BAGS

Quarried stone has been put to a variety of other uses, including the preparation of animal foodstuffs and fertilizers. Lime was also used to produce a popular whitewash paint for ceilings and pig sties. Staff at the Badminton Estate used it as an ingredient of the 'blue bags' used to improve the appearance of laundry.

a Chipping Sodbury baker used the contents of blue bags to give a brilliant finish to his cake icing!



RIDGE WOOD - THE FUTURE

Today, the wood is an important part of the landscape. It provides a green sanctuary for birds, mammals, minibeasts, flowers and other wildlife. It is important to keep Ridge Wood as a special place and work to increase its beauty and usefulness for all the people and wildlife that encounter it. To do this, it is necessary for humans to intervene in a positive way - a way that is planned. South Gloucestershire Council and the Friends of Ridge Wood are working in partnership with Hanson Aggregates to do this. These are some of the tasks being undertaken:

COPPING

For centuries, people have coppiced (or stooled) trees in order to use the wood. Re-introducing coppicing will allow sunlight to penetrate the Wood and encourage wildflowers and new saplings. A wood is not coppiced all at one time, but in rotation so that a range of different-age trees are provided to offer a variety of habitats for different creatures. Coppicing is said to lengthen the life of trees, encouraging the woodland to regenerate itself.



Woodland works - Spring 2003.

Can you find the old oak pollard

close to the footpath in the

middle of Ridge Wood?

trees. It was a method traditionally used to mark the boundaries of parishes and woods.

POLLARDING

This is the process by which a tree is lopped at a certain height. The trunk becomes broad and fissured, providing hidey-holes for birds, minibeasts, ferns and lichens. The upper growth is regularly cut back to maintain vigorous, appropriately-sized growth. Again, this method probably prolongs the life of

PLANTING

Provided there are sunny clearings, woodlands are able to regenerate themselves. But sometimes they need a little help. The planting of carefully-chosen species can add to the wildlife value and structure of the wood.





Removing dead wood - Spring 2003.

The native wildflowers and other flowers in the small patches of open grassland also benefit from coppicing and pollarding because of the increased sunlight on the ground. It is important that the grassland flowers are not shaded out by taller plants, so these areas will be carefully managed to prevent this happening.

NON-NATIVE TREES

The non-native parkland trees make this Wood very special and provide habitats for birds such as goldcrests and tree creepers as well as birds of prey. These trees will be cared for and replaced, if necessary, so that the unique atmosphere of this Wood is retained for the future.

Sycamore is a non-native tree that seeds prolifically and quickly dominates woodland.



Wildflower planting event - Autumn 2002.

▷ HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Take your litter home with you.
- Keep garden waste out of the Wood.
- Use the bins for dog mess.
- Guard against risk of fire.
- Keep dogs under proper control.
- Don't pick the flowers.
- Avoid damaging fences, hedges and walls.
- Remember that this land has been quarried and can be dangerous. Look at the map to see how you can explore the woodland, but for your own safety please stay on the waymarked paths.

Report tipping or any other problems to South Gloucestershire Council: 01454 868000.

This reduces the interest and wildlife value of the Wood. Sycamore will be gradually eliminated from the central and northern parts of the Wood and replaced with native species.

Dwarf bamboo, planted as an attractive ornamental feature, is also a dominant plant. It covers the woodland floor at the expense of more delicate flowers. It will be eradicated.





Ridge Wood from Melrose Avenue - Spring 2003.

BIRDS AND BATS

These creatures benefit from old trees with lots of nooks and crannies in them so that they can find places to roost and rear their young. However, there are few such venerable trees in Ridge Wood. Therefore, bird and bat boxes will be installed to provide this much-needed habitat.

PATHS

Paths, glades and rides will allow more sunlight to penetrate the Wood

and also to enable human visitors to enjoy their visit. The paths will be very 'natural' in appearance.

THE WIDER COUNTRYSIDE

Small woodlands in isolation do not thrive because wildlife cannot easily travel from one habitat to another. It is important to care for the wooded corridor to the north of Ridge Wood and encourage other links into the surrounding landscape so that species can continue to move around, colonising and replenishing the countryside.

▷ CREDITS

Ridge Wood is owned by Hanson Aggregates and managed by South Gloucestershire Council in partnership with the Friends of Ridge Wood.

Funding for practical work and interpretation has been provided by the Countryside Agency through the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund. Hanson Aggregates have kindly donated stone for path improvements and the siting of interpretation panels within the wood.



A PLACE FOR EVERYONE

All those who have been involved in the preparation of this booklet hope you have enjoyed reading about the past, present and future of this unique site. A further opportunity to learn about this special place has been provided by three new information panels in Ridge Wood. On these panels you will find items of particular interest about that part of the Wood including what trees, flowers, birds and animals might be seen close by.

So please enjoy Ridge Wood and visit often over the coming years. We hope you will see how careful management of the Wood has enhanced its beauty and increased its value for people and for wildlife.

We also hope you will share our visions for the conservation and enhancement of this distinctive landscape and be moved to help in whatever way. This could be doing something very simple - such as taking your litter home - or enjoying the satisfaction of taking part in special conservation workdays.

Ridge Wood has always been a place where people and nature have met and mingled. This process continues into the future - why not become a part of it? Join the Friends of Ridge Wood (contact **01454 863725**).

Its free and its fun!



Ridge Wood, Spring clean - 2001.

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 - A History Of Yate - **Lesley Johnson**
 - The National School - **Gladys Nelson**
 - Domesday - **Michael Wood**
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 - The Municipal Government of Bristol 1851-1901 - **Bristol Record Society**
 - Working in Barnhill Quarry - cassette tape recording interview of Gilbert Greenaway by Peter Guy - **Yate Oral History Society**
 - Yate - A Surprising History - **video by 1st Take**
 - Standbrook Guides website**
- Sharon Ubank would like to thank the many individuals who helped in the compiling of this booklet.*



RIDGE WOOD

WHERE IT IS AND HOW TO GET THERE

Find Ridge Wood at OS Ref: **ST 724 828**

OS Explorer Map 167: Thornbury, Dursley & Yate.

GETTING THERE

▶ **By bus:**

Several bus services operate to Yate Shopping Centre and some operate along Station Road or Greenways Road where there are stops close to Ridge Wood.

Timetable information is available from traveline **0870 6082608** daily between **7am** and **9pm**

By textphone: 0870 2412216

▶ **By bike:**

Although there are no cyclepaths through Ridge Wood, the site is easily accessible by other means.

▶ **On foot:**

A public footpath runs the entire length of Ridge Wood and there are several access points. New footpaths are planned and all will be signposted.



Forest of
**Ridge
Wood**

Hanson

Supported by the Countryside Agency through
the CDMRA (Countryside Management Research and
Action) Programme

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