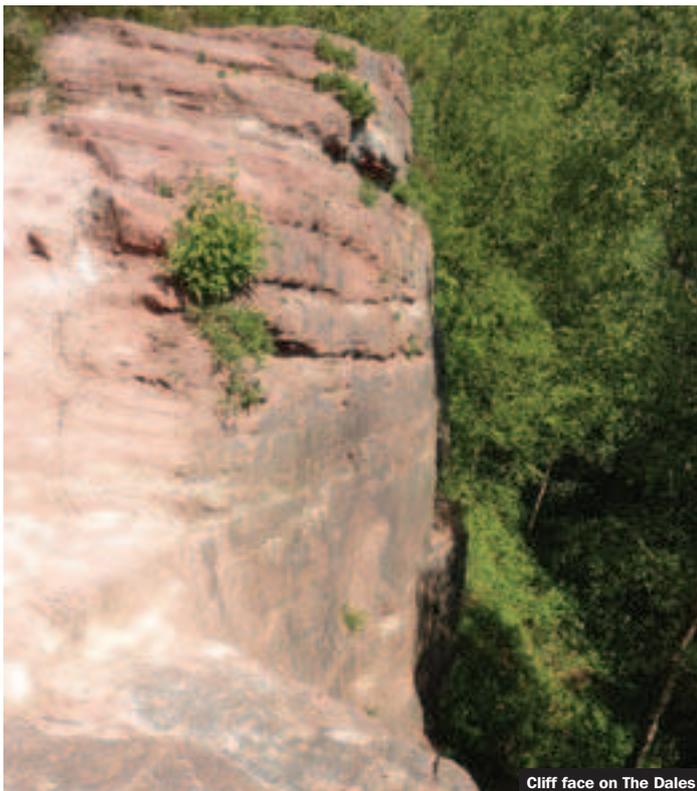


The History of Heswall Dales

by Roger Lane and Jenny McDonald

Heswall Dales is a remarkable public amenity, providing access to 72 acres of undeveloped heathland with panoramic views of the Dee Estuary and the Welsh hills, with special fauna and flora that is associated with lowland heath. The area is surrounded on all sides by the houses of Oldfield Road, Thurstaston Road, Oldfield Drive, Pipers Lane and Delavor Road, but due to large gardens and tree cover it is soon possible after entering the nature reserve to lose sight of these houses and to experience a sense of isolation remarkable in such a developed area as Heswall. In this article we explore the history of the Dales to explain how they were preserved for public enjoyment and how this very attractive and apparently natural landscape is actually a result of human intervention.



Cliff face on The Dales

The Dales slope steeply down from Oldfield Road to Pipers Lane, undercut by a few deep water-worn valleys. There is only a thin layer of sandy soil covering the underlying red sandstone, which is frequently exposed to dramatic effect in the southern end where fault lines have created impressive sandstone cliffs. The Dales has traditionally been common land, owned by the Lords of the Manor of Heswall who permitted local inhabitants to graze their sheep and cattle there. This led to heather becoming the predominant flora, as other species which grow well on such soils such as grasses, bracken, gorse, birch and oak were eaten before they had a chance to grow to a large enough size to overshadow the heather. Constant grazing on the young shoots of heather encouraged regeneration of healthy new growth. The beauty of the views and the colour of the heather when in blossom has been frequently captured in early postcards, highlighting a period when this was a very popular destination for picnics and rambles for both locals and visitors from the rest of Wirral and Liverpool.

The importance of the Dales as a good example of relatively rare lowland heath was recognised by its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1979, and as a Local Nature Reserve in 1990. However, the landscape is under threat as there is no longer grazing on the land, and gorse, bracken, birch and oak have taken a strong hold in parts, especially along the valleys where the trees are now dense and mature. The dramatic reduction in the rabbit population following the myxomatosis epidemic in



Path through The Dales showing extensive growth of bracken, gorse and trees

the 1950s may also have played a role in the change of the flora. While occasional fires, such as the major fire in the hot summer of 1963 that consumed 150 acres of the Dales and surrounding land, encouraged regrowth of the heather on the healthy moorland, the existence of competing gorse and bracken would now make a fire disastrous for the remaining heather. The Ranger, assisted by volunteers and the Friends of the Dales, is fighting a constant battle to preserve at least part of the traditional heathland character by removing the gorse, bracken and saplings to stop the heather being overwhelmed. The ecology of the area is very sensitive, and the Friends Group have asked us to remind dog owners to place their dogs' droppings in the bins provided, as these droppings over-enrich the soil and disturb the delicate balance of the flora, as well as making conservation work unpleasant.



View from Oldfield Road with Dale Farm in background and absence of trees

The land occupied by the Dales was owned until recent times by the Lords of the Manor of Heswall who derived their title from Robert of Rhuddlan, a Norman knight awarded extensive lands for his services during the Norman conquest. The Heswall Tithe map of 1859 shows only two buildings on this land on plots rented from the Lord of the Manor – at that time William Lloyd. The history of one of these buildings, Dale Farm, has been described by Mark Kinnish in a series of articles which appeared in this magazine and have now been published as a book available at the farm shop. The farm was reported to be built in 1834 by James Barlow and passed on to his son, also James, in the mid-1800s. In 1902 George McGrath and his family moved into the farm and eventually bought it at auction in 1920. There was a holiday cottage on the farm which generated additional income. It was badly damaged by bombing during the war. The farm stayed in the McGrath family until it was sold at auction to the local council in 1973. After some discussion on possible uses for the farm, the site now provides a day service for adults with disabilities and support for adults with mental health needs. The service provides opportunities to learn life skills through the therapeutic use of horticulture within a beautiful setting. The original farmhouse has been rebuilt and the holiday cottage is now the Ranger's office.