

The Doug Heald Trail at Clifton Backies Nature Reserve



Introduction

Clifton Backies, designated a Local Nature Reserve in 2002 is a wonderful and interesting site to visit both for the animals and plants that it supports but also for its use in history. This trail will provide you with an idea of the diverse wildlife that makes its home in the important and varied habitats, and take you back to the times when Clifton Backies looked very different to how it is today.

The **city of York** in general has a long and interesting history going back hundreds of years, and there is evidence that can be seen today that links Clifton Backies and the immediate vicinity with many of these important times.

If you take a look at the site on a 1:25000 OS map (LR105), it is clearly marked with **Roman Camp (sites of)** on Bootham Stray to the immediate north of Backies. Although farming has largely removed remains of these camps, from the air it is possible to make out the perimeters of two large marching camps that would be due north of the Legionary Fortress of York.

In Norman times, the **Royal Forest of Galtres** will have extended north from the York Fortress covering about 100,000 acres, and the landscape would have been predominantly wooded at this time.

From the 11th Century, the land belonged to **St. Mary's Abbey** and would have been used for growing arable crops following deforestation. After the dissolution of the monasteries in the early 14th Century, the land became part of a furlong or field known as '**Moor Broats**', which was within the Parish of Clifton's arable fields and was cultivated under the strip farming system in medieval times. The current ridge and furrow appearance of the fields is as a result of this. Due to the slight curve of some of the ridged furrows we are able to identify the work as having been done by a plough drawn by oxen. There is also some evidence that part of the site might have still been under arable management into the nineteenth century.

In recent history, the site had been part of the former **Clifton Airfield** but after its last use in the Berlin Airlift in the late 1940's, it had returned to nature and become both a local amenity with concrete pathways making for easier access and a wildlife area as lack of cutting allowed scrub to develop.

Douglas A Heald (1943 – 2015) was a renowned local artist who spent much of his youth roaming freely on the Clifton Backies, sparking a life-long passion for natural history and conservation. Doug's appreciation of the countryside developed into a skill for painting and art, opening galleries in Petergate and the Shambles in York. He visited and enjoyed the site throughout his life, and was an active member of the Friends of Clifton Backies.

The Friends of Clifton Backies are a local volunteer group that share a common interest in the Clifton Backies Local Nature Reserve, and help to preserve and promote the beauty of the site. The group provides a link between the local community and the management board, organising regular events and work days through quarterly meetings.

If you would like to hear more and help us to maintain this wonderful site, become a member by downloading a membership form from our website www.cliftonbackies.org.uk.

Distance – 1.25 miles / 2 km

Difficulty – Easy. Wheelchair & pushchair friendly for all but points 6 & 7.

Grid Reference – SE 59725 53914

How to get there – Walking, cycling, by bus: First York No. 6 and by Car: Parking at Sutton Way and Woodland Chase

Notes – Clifton Backies is a Local Nature Reserve, please take your litter home and pick up after your dog.

Occasionally wet underfoot at points 6 & 7.

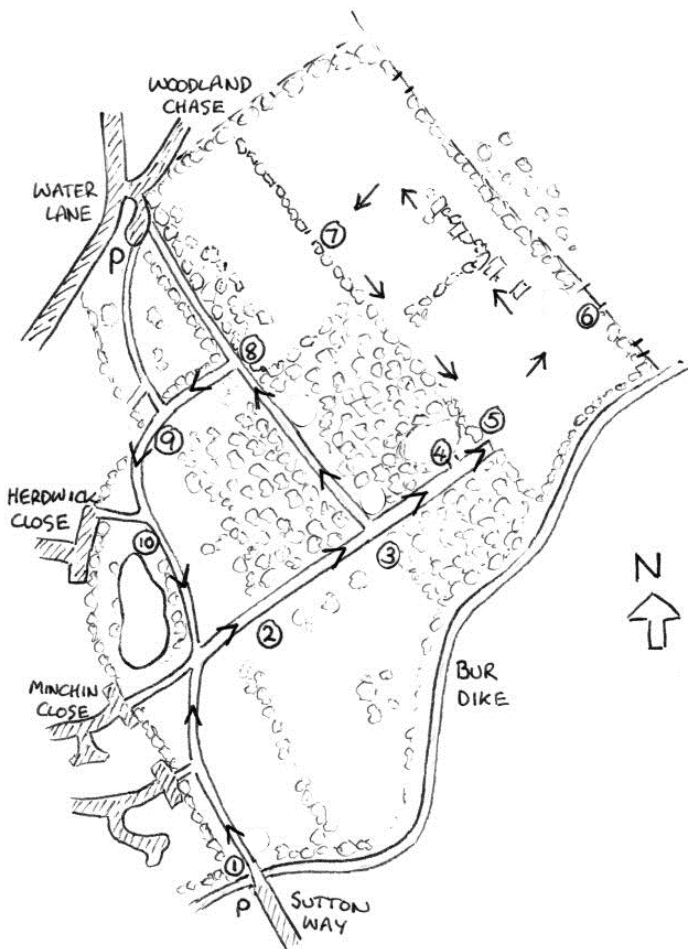


1. Bur Dike

Habitat: Hedgerow, Freshwater Stream

Bur Dike runs along the East boundary of Clifton Backies and in times past was used to provide drainage for the land. Although it is fairly overgrown with trees and shrubs today, the dike provides a home for wildlife that you don't see in other parts of Backies. Plants growing in the dike include **watercress** and **parsley water dropwort**, which form the diet of a protected mammal that lives in its banks – the **water vole**. Recently, the Friends of Clifton Backies and other like-minded groups have been clearing the banks to improve the habitat for the water vole since they prefer more open wetland habitats away from tree cover.

If you peer into the water from the bridge at Sutton Way entrance, you will see another of the dike's inhabitants darting around – **three-spine sticklebacks**. Sticklebacks are fish that live and feed at the bottom of a stream. In spring the male develops a red throat and builds a nest for his mate to lay her eggs. He is very territorial, chasing away any rivals that dare to come too close!



Make your way along the path and turn right at the junction with the noticeboard. The next marker is on the right.

2. Old Hay Meadow

Habitat: Unimproved Meadow Grassland

The meadow areas are probably the most important habitats of Clifton Backies. Meadows have declined at an alarming rate over the years having been taken for farming, and therefore protected ancient meadows such as these need to be maintained to support dependent wildlife. In the summer months, you will see the **great burnet** flower in large numbers, along with **pignut** and **betony** amongst the fine-leaved grasses including **Yorkshire fog**. In autumn this meadow will be cropped for hay, a long tradition that maintains the low fertility that is important for native wildlife.

If you visit in July, there will be butterflies all around you – **meadow brown**, **ringlet**, **marbled white**, **small** and **large skippers**. Their larvae feed on the grasses, and the butterflies on the nectar of the meadow flowers.

If you were standing here during the **World War II**, you would see a large **Gym** and **Chancel** building that formed part of the Mess site for the Clifton Airfield. All that remains is the concrete road that you are walking on.

Walk further along the path to the end of the meadow where you will find the next marker.

3. Woodland Edge

Habitat: Scrub Woodland, Unimproved Meadow Grassland

At the edge of the Backies scrub woodland, the **ash** and **oak trees** tower above you and are filled with bird song. Song birds including **blackbird**, **thrush** and **robin** are plentiful, but some woodland species such as **bullfinch**, **chiffchaff** and **blackcap** may be seen at various times of the year. The oak trees here support a larger number of species of wildlife than any other British tree including nearly 300 recorded species of insect. One of these is the **Purple Hairstreak** butterfly, which spends most of its time in the treetops.



On the edge of the wood the dominant plant is **bramble**, which forms an impenetrable spiny barrier, but in autumn it rewards us with a bounty of ripe, black berries. Another mammal that enjoys this free, juicy fruit is the **fox** that emerges at dusk to feast on wind fall berries.

The largest building on this **World War II** site was the **dining room**, an eating place for all ranks of RAF staff and visitors. This would have been situated to the left of this junction. Near the junction, if you look closely you may see a **bicycle rack**, a popular mode of transport around the camp.

Carry on in the same direction with scrub woodland on each side. Take the turning to your left to enter a break in the trees. Have a rest on one of the hand-crafted benches!

4. Woodland Glade

Habitat: Scrub Woodland, Unmanaged Grassland, Wind protection

This woodland glade is another great habitat for animals and plants since it is protected from extreme wind and frost. Here the plants are layered, from the canopy layer of trees through to the shrub layer containing blackthorn and bramble down to the ground layer of grass and wild flowers

The concrete beneath you was actually the floor of a **squash court** in the World War II camp! You can imagine Allied airfield personnel of different nationalities as fierce rivals on the squash court! While sitting on the benches, the area to your right was a **groceries store**, and would be stocked with provisions that were rationed to make sure everyone got their fair share.

Exit the glade from where you entered and turn left. The next marker is on the gate post. (The terrain is not suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs here, but you can continue the trail by making your way to point 8.)



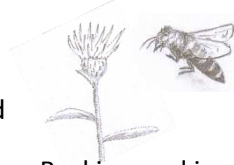
5. Ridge and Furrow

Habitat: Unimproved Grazed Grassland

This is another of the meadows on Clifton Backies, and is grazed every year by cattle to keep the grass low and “unimproved”. In summer the meadow is a kaleidoscope of colours with flowers such as **knapweed**, **meadow buttercup** and **red clover**.

Here you can see evidence of the ‘**ridge and furrow**’ shape of the land made by ox plough, resulting from arable farming during medieval times. The land would have been divided into strips and farmed by different people or families, and these strips were often handed down through generations of the family.

Walk across the meadow towards the gate at the far side.



6. Airfield Site No. 1

Habitat: Scrub, Unmanaged Grassland

The fields over the gate are known as Bootham Stray, and provide grazing for cattle. In **Roman** times, these fields were set up as two **marching camps** for the Roman fortress of York. A Roman legion would stay here ahead of making a move into unknown or enemy territory.

You will also see more evidence of the World War II camp, with the remains of **blast shelters** clearly visible with trees and scrub now growing from within. A map of the airfield lists this area as “Site No. 1” and the purpose is blanked out and marked “Restricted” – obviously secrecy was paramount during these times! A path linked the mess site you have been exploring to this site running through the centre of the meadow (now a hedge).

A hedgerow splits the camp, dividing Clifton Backies from Bootham Stray, and is home to a variety of species of wildlife. Butterflies including **small copper** and **gatekeeper** are most at home in this habitat – the adult male butterflies protect their patch of hedgerow passionately against intruders.

Do not enter the gate, but turn around and walk along the track through the meadow keeping the blast shelters on your right, through a dividing hedge. A left turn takes you back towards the woods and a gate into the marshlands.

7. Marshlands

Habitat: Marshy Grassland, Unimproved Grazed Grassland



The field over the gate is marsh or wet meadow for much of the year, which you can see from the plants growing there – **rush** and **sedge** dominate the grasses growing, and in summer the area will be patrolled by **damselflies** and **dragonflies**, picking flies out of the air and eating them while in flight. At night, the patrol will be handed over to bats such as the pipistrelle.

Small birds and mammals such as **field vole**, **common shrew** and **wood mouse** live in this meadow and hedgerow, and this attracts birds of prey – **kestrel**, **sparrowhawk** and **owl** species.

Turn left and walk along the meadow to the gate at point 5. Walk back along the concrete path passing the woodland glade on your right, and turn right at the junction. Point 8 is found under a blue sign at the next junction.

8. Officers' Mess

Habitat: Scrub Woodland



In the thick of the wood, woodland flowers such as **dog violet** and **forget-me-not** grow in the dappled sunlight. Until the 1990s, the **speckled wood** butterfly would not be present this far north, but now it is the fourth most common butterfly - you may see two or more speckled woods spiralling up to the tree canopy and then resting on a sunny leaf. In spring, the **orange tip** butterfly will be seen fluttering along the path borders looking for **garlic mustard** and **cuckooflower** to lay its eggs.

This area was the heart of the air camp, being home to the **officers' mess** on one side of the path, and the **sergeants' mess** on the other. You would also find the **officers' bathhouse** and **sergeants' shower block** here.

Take the path behind you, a left turn from the path you came. Carry on down the path until reaching point 9.

9. Brimstone Copse

Habitat: Scrub, Unmanaged Grassland

While walking this trail we have seen all the habitats present at Clifton Backies nature reserve, and how they are managed to protect and sustain the diverse wildlife living here. This point is a good example and success story of how we have improved the habitat to help a native species. A copse of **alder buckthorn** trees planted by volunteers is now home to the **brimstone** butterfly – In spring, the colourful yellow adults lay their eggs on the young growth at the tips of the branches. As a result, the brimstone has flourished and has increased its numbers in the area.

In World War II there was a **fuel store** in this section.

Continue straight on to the last marker.

10. Backies Pond

Habitat: Standing Water



The last point on this trail is the Backies Pond. It is used to collect the rainwater draining off the housing estate, but is another important habitat, being home to **waterfowl** and **heron**. In spring **frogs**, **toads** and **newts** visit the pond to spawn. Unlikely residents of Backies pond are **terrapins** – you may see them basking on sunny platforms before diving into the dark water when disturbed. The presence of these discarded pets is not very welcome to native wildlife though, since they are carnivorous they eat **dragonfly larvae**, **fish** and **ducklings**.

The banks of the pond have been sown with native wildflowers in among **willow** trees. Although the water may rise to cover the banks in winter, the flowers are buzzing with insect life in summer.