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ANTHONY ORME

SMITHILLS – Three amazing attractions in one place

By Andrew Harris



The woodland image is courtesy of John McPherson

In the centre of our region – just north of Bolton – there is a place called Smithills which is undiscovered by most people. As it comprises a largely accessible rural estate of 1700 acres, the historic Grade 1 listed manor house Smithills Hall and the huge Smithills Open Farm – collectively known as the Smithills Country Park – it is worth discovering.

The 1700-acre Smithills Estate was at risk but became the largest site ever acquired by the Woodland Trust charity. Running south from the famous 310m high Winter Hill TV mast it is a rich mosaic of grassland, moorland, farmland, wooded cloughs and wildlife habitats which is crisscrossed by dry stone walls and offers panoramic views over Bolton to Manchester. Two years

after purchasing two-thirds of the Estate in 2015 the Woodland Trust succeeded in acquiring the remainder so that the future of the Estate could be assured helped by the continuing commitment and generosity of local people and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The future of its fantastic landscape is secure although further funding is needed to achieve the improvements needed.

The Woodland Trust plans to double the current 10% woodland coverage and increasingly interpret the land's wealth of history to bring its currently hidden but important industrial and archaeological features to life and interpret this by new signage. At the same time wildlife and habitat surveys are planned to preserve the estate's precious flora and fauna so that plants

and wildlife can be protected into the future.

When further funding and improvements have been achieved the Smithills Estate has the potential to become an exemplar for the estimated 170,000 acres of urban fringe landscape in northern England alone. The vision is to become 'A wildlife-rich, resilient landscape, able to adapt to and cope with current and future threats and challenges such as climate change, pollution, pests and diseases – and to provide people with a wide range of services and benefits.' The ultimate aim is to demonstrate that conservation, farming, recreation, community engagement and local business can do much more than simply exist side by side. They can much more mutually

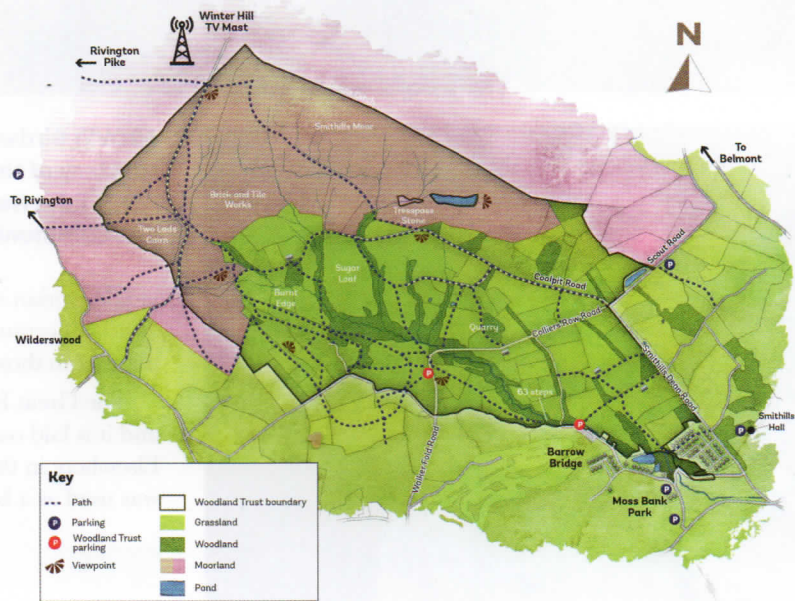


ABOVE: A path through woodlands on the Smithills Estate. Picture courtesy of the Woodland Trust. RIGHT: The Smithills Estate. The Open Farm adjoins Smithills Hall. Map courtesy of the Woodland Trust.

supporting and provide real benefits to each other. This vision has great appeal at Smithills but can then be replicated in many similar areas around the country.

The Woodland Trust wants to work with people who know the land well – such as tenants, nearby landowners and everyone who has an interest in the site – and will consider economic and social opportunities for those living or working on or near the site as well as delivering landscape and ecological change. It is a huge opportunity for all interested parties to influence the future of the Smithills Estate. Part of the effort is directed to attracting new and existing businesses to the estate. Anybody interested should call 0330 333 5314 or email smithillsenterprise@woodlandtrust.org.uk

The Smithills Estate is a stunning upland landscape in sharp contrast to the urban areas where most people live. It is worth a visit for the proverbial breath of fresh air. You can also reconnect with nature and be surprised by what you have been missing. Russell Hedley represents



the Woodland Trust on site but also offers nature walks and talks to help adults, schoolchildren and groups to understand and get the most out of the countryside. For full information visit www.naturewalksandtalks.co.uk

Smithills Hall is a Grade 1 listed manor house and scheduled monument and is open for visits each Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday unless you only want *Poppins at Smithills* - a tea room with a Mary Poppins theme which is open all week. Since 1938 the hall and grounds of 120 acres has been owned by Bolton Council which

has restored much of the structure including the west wing in 1999 and the Devey Room this year.

Smithills Hall is one of the oldest manor houses in north west England. The name Smithills derives from the Old English *smebe* which means smooth and *hyll* or hill which became *Smythell* in 1322. The original but smaller Manor House was built as a half-timbered structure in the 1300s since when it has been extended several times. It was owned by William Radcliffe from 1335 then his son Sir Ralph Radcliffe – who was High Sheriff of Lancashire for 3



ABOVE: Birdwatching is popular at Smithills. Picture courtesy of the Woodland Trust.

LEFT: Russ Hedley is the Woodland Trust's Marketing and Communications Officer at the Smithills Estate.



years - after 1369 when his father died. In 1485 ownership passed to the Bartons who were wealthy sheep farmers and lived there for nearly 200 years. From 1659 the hall and grounds were owned in succession by the Belasyse, Byrom and Ainsworth families then around 1875 Sir Richard Henry Ainsworth commissioned the architect George Devey to extend and modernise the hall. Hence the Devey Room. In 1938 the Ainsworths sold the hall to Bolton Corporation who used part of it as a residential home and day centre which closed in 1990.

The Hall has many attractions. Colonel Ainsworth's Room dates back to the 16th century but it became the colonel's private sitting room in the 19th century when he would relax after a day of grouse shooting on the moors. It is decorated

in a Victorian style and contains furniture from the 18th and 19th centuries -and an original barrel organ which was popular in those times.

The Great Hall is an impressive medieval dining room and it is laid out for a feast with a suit of armour displayed. Elsewhere in the Hall visitors can see the Solar Room which was used as a bedroom and somewhere to which the ladies



ABOVE: The splendid rear elevation of Smithills Hall which overlooks extensive grounds.



ABOVE: Walking through the grounds of Smithills Hall.

– more deferential in those days – could retreat. The Hall contains a substantial original chapel which is still consecrated and used for weddings from time to time. Look for the stained glass windows and the pulpit from which the clergy could look down on their congregations.

It is worth visiting the grounds of Smithills Hall even when the Hall is closed. They are beautifully laid out and maintained - and there is no charge.

On three weekdays – see above - Smithills Hall is open 10-4 and 12-4 on Sundays. Last admissions on all four days is 3pm.



The cost of entrance is just £3 for adults and £2 for the young and old with under-5s going free. There is plenty of parking which is free.

Anthony Grimshaw's family had farmed in Lancashire for many years before he moved to Smithills in 1986. He prospered with a herd of 120 cows until milk prices dropped with the dawn of the new century. Motivated by need and encouraged by Bolton Council, Anthony diversified by opening the farm to visitors in 2001 - initially from March to September. The popularity and success of the open farm increased as word spread and it is now open all year. The family's commitment to the highest standards of animal welfare and customer care have paid off and the open farm



ABOVE: The Tea Room at Smithills Hall. Picture by the Friends of Smithills Hall.



was given a huge boost by the growth of social media.

In 2009 the farm was granted a zoo licence since when it has been home to many animals such as cows, pigs, goats, sheep, rabbits, llamas, meerkats, donkeys, ducks, skunks and deer – plus a Burmese python. Apart from the animals and donkey rides the farm offers an adventure playground, inflatable assault course, bouncy castles, tractor tours, a souvenir shop, café and ice cream parlour. In the Pets Corner visitors can bottle feed baby lambs and goats, hold baby rabbits, chicks and guinea pigs as well as safely meeting snakes and owls close up.

Today's Smithills Open Farm is still a family-run business set within 70 acres of rolling countryside where all are welcome and children can have the time of their lives. It has many attractions and is constantly evolving. See the picture for prices and opening times but for full information visit www.smithillsopenfarm.co.uk

The Countryside, Hall and Open Farm of Smithills can be found via Smithills Dean Road which runs between the A58 Moss Bank Way in the south to Scout Road (which links with the A675 Belmont Road) in the north. Access from the north is not signposted. Aim for the postcode BL1 7NP. Additional car parking for the nature walks is available nearby in Barrow Bridge.

The three attractions of Smithills have been funded by the Woodlands Trust, Heritage Lottery Fund, Bolton Council, local donations and by the business venture which created the Open Farm but the appeal is regional. With more – possibly joint - marketing and better signposting many more adults, families and schoolchildren could enjoy the experience that is Smithills.



Andrew Harris – www.andrewharris.co.uk – gratefully acknowledges the help provided by

Russell Hedley of the Woodlands Trust in the preparation of this article. The photo montage was created by Bridge Graphics of Southport and the pictures are by your columnist unless otherwise attributed. This article replaces the planned feature about the Lancashire Energy HQ.