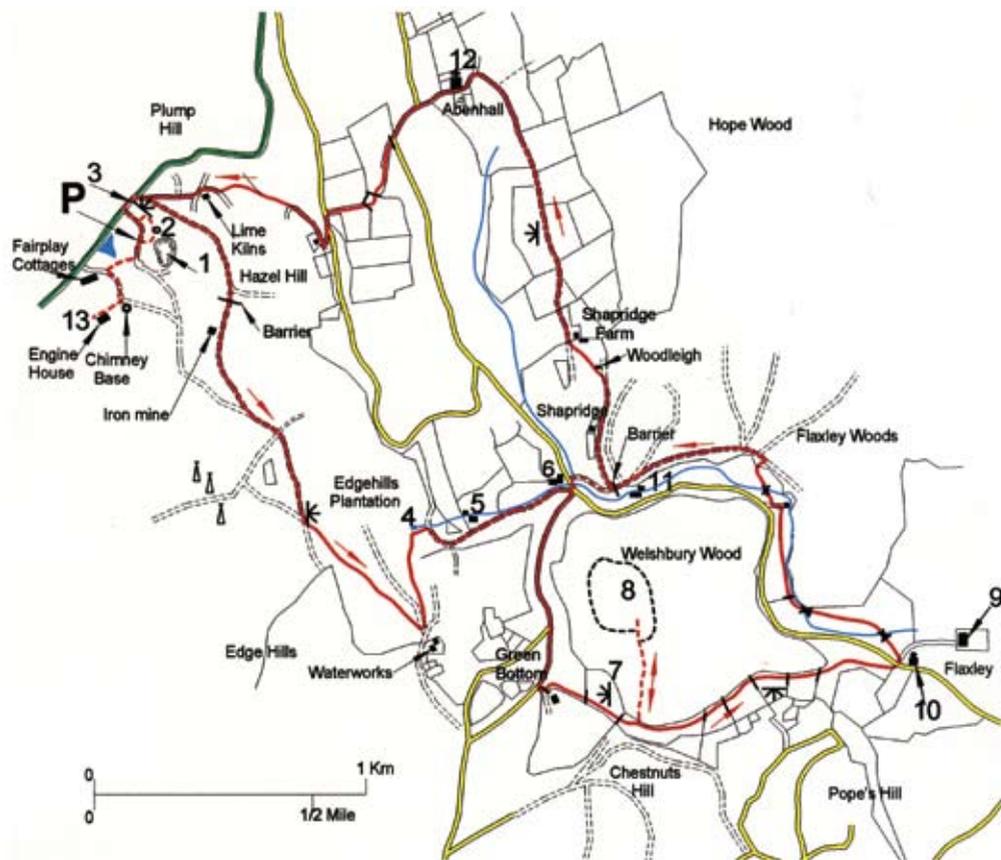


Plump Hill, Flaxley, and Abenhall

Old mills and iron mines, St Anthony's Well, an Iron Age hill fort, Flaxley Abbey, and a miners' church. A fairly hilly walk, mainly on field paths and forest paths and tracks; 7 (or 9) stiles.

START at the parking area near the top of Plump Hill on south side of A4136 Monmouth–Gloucester Road: GR SO 660169. Turn off the A4136 onto a gravel road opposite a minor road signposted to Wilderness; there are several places where cars can be parked a short distance along this road. **Refreshments:** none on walk route; pubs and shops in Mitcheldean.



BEFORE STARTING THE WALK, there are several points of interest to look at. Go up the grassy bank, which is behind you as you face the main road. Just before the woods at the top of the hill is a quarry (1). Now turn left

and descend towards the main road, keeping to the right-hand side of the grass area. Just below the quarry in a hollow near the edge of the hill is the concreted shaft of Westbury Brook Iron Mine (2). A little way below this

there is an excellent view over Abenhall and May Hill (3). Now go down to the main road, turn right for a few yards, and right again at a lane. Keep right onto a gravel track and follow this uphill past houses, then, where the main track curves sharp left downhill, go straight ahead past a barrier. Up to the right, after about 200 yds, is a fenced entrance to Westbury Brook Mine, now used by cavers. Keep ahead where a wider track comes in from the right, and soon views towards the Cotswolds and River Severn open up. Where power lines come in from the right and the track starts to descend more steeply, look for a footpath (generally muddy) forking left downhill. This continues to descend past a stile before eventually emerging onto a gravel track near some stone waterworks buildings.

Just across this track is another (muddy) footpath, which goes sharp left following powerlines. Follow this downhill through trees, keeping straight ahead as it levels out through a more open area and then descends into a hollow which contains the stone-lined St Anthony's Well (4). Turn right here and follow the stream which issues from the well down onto a dirt track. (It is usually easiest to keep right of the stream, but after heavy rain it may be necessary to go past the well and keep to the left bank.) Turn right and follow the track as it bends left, passing Upper Mill (5), on the left, and, just before a road junction, Gunns Mill (6), also on the left. *For a shortcut, turn left on the tarmac road beyond the latter mill, then sharp right after 40 yds onto a gravel forest road. This bends left to a barrier, just before which you turn left onto a track up a small valley.* The main route goes sharp right on the tarmac road towards Littledean and Cinderford, past the turnoff to Green Bottom, about 200 yds after which is a footpath sign pointing left. Follow a track towards a house for a few yards and then go through the field gate on your left. Climb the hill, keeping left of the fence, and go through a gate in the field corner. There are good views behind you of Green Bottom, Edge Hills, and Plump Hill (7). Cross the next field and go thorough another gate. About 100 yds ahead, on the left-hand

edge of the field, is a stile beside a gate, but only cross this if you want to see Welshbury Hill Fort (8). *Just beyond the stile is a grass track. Cross this, bearing slightly left, and take the footpath ahead. Follow the path uphill for about 300 yds through Welshbury Wood to the ramparts of the hill fort. The good state of preservation of the earthworks is partly due to their location, woodland cover and low visitor numbers. Walkers wishing to visit the site are therefore asked to use existing footpaths and to help avoid causing further erosion by not climbing on exposed banks, especially after wet weather. This will help to ensure the preservation of this impressive monument for future generations. Retrace your steps to the stile, cross, and turn left.*

To continue the walk, follow the left-hand edges of several fields downhill, going over a stile and through three gates, to a kissing gate at the end of the wood. There are views of the Severn and Cotswolds ahead and Pope's Hill to the right. Bear slightly left across the field, following a track to the left of a large yew tree, with Flaxley Abbey (9) and Church (10) appearing ahead. Continue down to the bottom corner of the field, where two stiles will take you onto a tarmac road near the church. Across the road, just left of the driveway to Flaxley Abbey, is another stile. Follow the path across the field through a gate and over Westbury Brook, bearing left to go through a gate near the edge of the woods. Keep left of the stream to a gateway, and cross the middle of the next field to a stile to the left of a house. Turn left on the driveway and then right just before a cattle grid. Follow the field path back over the stream, before bearing slightly left to a stile into woodland. (There is another stile further to the left, but the intervening field is very boggy.) Cross this and climb a few yards onto a gravel forest road, where you turn left. You eventually pass, down on the left, a group of buildings which includes the former Flaxley Mill (11). Just past these, bear slightly left at a track junction, go past a barrier, and immediately turn sharp right onto a narrower track which ascends a small valley. *The short cut comes in from the left here.*

Walk up the track past a house, but fork left onto a stony path just before the next house (Woodleigh), passing above it. Bear left across the green in front of Shapridge Farm, and then bear right to take the dirt track just to the left of the farm buildings. Follow this track, which soon becomes a tarmac lane, for over half a mile; there are more good views of the valley and Edge Hills on your left. The Gloucestershire Way (*see Walk 14*) comes in from the right, and we will follow this back to Plump Hill. Shortly after this, the lane bends left and passes Abenhall Church (12). Continue to the junction and turn left, taking particular care, as this is quite a busy road. After 150 yds, turn right through a gate at a byway sign and follow the grassy track as it descends first left and then right to a gate in the far corner of the field. Go through this and then the second of two gates just beyond on the right before climbing up by a small stream to a gate onto a road. Turn left and after 40 yds fork right onto an uphill gravel track. Turn sharp right in front of the house, continuing up the track and keeping ahead onto a footpath where the track bends sharp left. Follow this path, ignoring side paths, as it climbs steadily to come out onto a tarmac driveway.

Bear right, then turn left onto a lane at a T-junction near old lime kilns. Follow the lane as it bends right and climbs up Hazel Hill past houses, ignoring side turnings. Towards the top of the hill you pass the site of the 1913 collapse, down on the right, before the lane emerges onto a main road. Turn left and left again to return to the parking area.

Before taking your boots off, those interested can look at the imposing remains of Fairplay Iron Mine engine house. About 200 yds from the main road junction, where the gravel road starts to bend left, there is a small clearing/parking area on the left. A short distance before this, but on the right, a rather indistinct footpath leads into the trees near a large oak. Follow this onto a dirt track and turn left, with Fairplay Cottages visible to the right. After about 120 yds (just before a left-hand bend), there is another indistinct (muddy!) path on the right, about 100 yds along which is the engine house (13). Return to the dirt track, turn right for about 60 yds, and just behind an old spoil heap on the right is the stone base of a ventilation chimney. You can then either return to your car by the outward route or continue along the dirt track to the first junction, where you turn sharp left back to the parking area.

Edge Hills Quarry (1)

There are a number of old quarries on Edge and Plump Hills, and quarrying has probably taken place here for centuries. They worked various units of the Carboniferous Limestone Series, mainly the Lower Limestone Shale, Lower Dolomite, and Crease, Whitehead, and Drybrook Limestones, but also Drybrook Sandstone. Much of the limestone was used for lime burning, and the 1891 OS map shows seven old lime kilns on Plump Hill alone. The large quarry seen here shows the steeply dipping Drybrook Sandstone well: the strata dip at about 65° to the west. The quarry was known as “illegal”, supposedly because it began as a sandstone quarry, but was then extended into limestone without permission, being closed down in the late 1960s or early 70s. There is another, very overgrown limestone quarry (Hazel Hill Quarry) a couple of hundred yards to the east. A large limestone quarry across the main road on Plump Hill was where 36000 tons of stone were blasted in a single explosion in about 1899. At that time the quarry was owned by Aaron Simmonds. All these quarries have been abandoned for many years.

Westbury Brook Iron Mine (2)

The area has almost certainly been mined since Iron Age and Roman times, although there is little direct evidence for this. The gale of Westbury Brook was applied for by Thomas and Moses Teague and James Mountjoy, on behalf of Sir Josiah John Guest (owner of the Dowlais

Iron Co.), in the mid-1830s, but was not awarded until 1841. Old Pit shaft had reached a depth of 360 ft by 1837, and the first iron ore was won in 1843. A tramroad connection to the Forest of Dean Railway’s tramroad to Bullo Pill on the River Severn had been constructed by this time, but after the latter was converted to a broad-gauge line in 1854, the branch tramroad terminated at a transshipment wharf at Whimsey. Westbury Brook (also known as Edge Hills) Mine worked an area two miles long from north to south, which included the Deans Meend gale. Old Pit shaft reached two levels (Nos 1 and 2 at 280 and 360 ft below surface, respectively), and New Pit shaft had two crosscuts (No. 3 at 570 and No. 4 at 650 ft) which were driven eastwards into the Crease Limestone, and from each of which headings were driven both north and south. No. 4 level was not completed until 1884. There was also a pre-1837 shaft at Beech Pit on the southern gale boundary, which was reached by No. 3 level. Water was a major problem, and a 45-inch Cornish rotary beam engine was installed for pumping. Production of iron ore in 1880 was 12413 tons. About 958 000 tons were produced between 1843 and 1893, when the mine closed, much of it being transported to Dowlais. If the ore which must have been mined from the old workings is included, the total production could well be 2–3 million tons. The gale was surrendered in 1902, and subsequent proposals to re-open the mine in conjunction with other iron gales along the eastern outcrop did not come to fruition. Like most large mines, Westbury Brook was not free of accidents. A particularly tragic one occurred in 1860 when two children visiting the pumping engine house were scalded to death when a steam pipe fractured. Two miners, George Malsom and Thomas Moore, were killed and others injured in May 1878 when the ore cart in which they were being hauled up the shaft fell back down. On 12 October 1913, there was a major surface collapse near Old Pit, fortunately injuring no-one, but causing several cottages to be evacuated. Today the mine, which contains some enormous caverns (or ‘churns’), is an important sanctuary for greater and lesser horseshoe bats. The mine reservoir, between the parking area and the main road, is now a nature reserve, noted particularly for its aquatic invertebrates (dragonflies, diving beetles, water boatmen, and water scorpions), newts, and frogs.

View (3)

The view from here takes in the Westbury Brook Valley below, Abenhall Church (which you will pass later in the walk), and the rounded May Hill, with its distinctive clump of trees on the summit (*see Walk 12*). You are standing on Carboniferous Limestone rocks here, but the lower ground below and the ridge beyond Abenhall Church, together with the wooded Welshbury and Chestnut Hills to the right, are underlain by Lower Old Red Sandstone Brownstones. Further away, towards May Hill, are older Old Red Sandstone units (St Maughan’s and Raglan Mudstone Groups), underlain by



Silurian rocks, which are found in the Blaisdon–Longhope–May Hill area. Further away again towards the Severn, beyond the Blaisdon Fault, which runs north-northeast near Newnham, Blaisdon and Huntley, are much younger Triassic (Mercia Mudstone Group or ‘Keuper Marl’) and Lower Jurassic (Lias) rocks. The latter subsided relative to the Devonian and Silurian rocks to the west when the Blaisdon Fault was formed (*see also Walks 11 and 12*). At the bottom of Plump Hill, and just out of sight to the left, is the large village of Mitcheldean. By the 13th century it had already become an industrial centre, due to its proximity to iron ore deposits, and was a producer of cloth and leather. The Parish Church of St Michael is 13th to 15th century, and has an impressive spire. There are some attractive 15th to 17th century timber-framed houses in Millend and Merrin Streets, as well as some nice late 18th and 19th century houses. The arcaded sandstone Old Town Hall is early 18th century. There were once a considerable number of inns catering for the passing traffic, market traders, and townsfolk, and three survive: the White Horse and the George, both apparently dating back to the 17th century, and the Lamb. Mitcheldean brewery was the largest in Dean in the 19th century, when it was owned by the Wintle family. The original brewery building is now known as The Mews and is occupied by local businesses. On the edge of the village is a large business park which includes Xerox, one of the largest employers in the Forest of Dean. Unfortunately, in recent years this industry has been hit by recession and is now only a shadow of its former self.



to cure skin complaints like ‘St Anthony’s Fire’, an itching disease. The present stone-lined bathing pool probably dates from the late 18th century.

Upper Mill (5)

This appears to have been used as a fulling mill before its conversion to paper making in 1742, about the same time as Gunns Mill (6). The upper storey is slatted, probably for ventilation purposes. About 100 yds downstream are the scanty remains of Middle Mill. In 1701 this was a corn mill, but later seems to have been used as a washing shed for the paper mills.

Gunns Mill (6)

Gunns (or Guns) Mill was originally a corn mill, but a charcoal iron blast furnace was built on the site in about 1628. It was owned by Sir John Wintour (or Wynter) in 1635, but was seized by the Parliamentarians during the Civil War and was later destroyed. The remains

were rebuilt in 1682–3, as indicated by the dates on cast-iron lintels in the furnace house. The building was converted to a paper mill in about 1743 by Joseph Lloyd, and a wide range of paper was produced. Steam power supplemented water from about 1860, but the works closed in 1879. Gunns Mill is considered to be the finest surviving example of a charcoal blast furnace in the country and is Grade II* listed. The furnace and blowing chamber are built of coursed, squared rubble stone and the upper storey, which dates from the rebuilding, is partly timber-framed, with a slate roof. Behind is a 25 ft long pit for an overshot waterwheel. The whole structure was encased in scaffolding and plastic sheeting by English Heritage in 2000, and it is to be hoped that it will eventually be restored to its former glory. The adjacent brick-built Gunn Mill House dates from the early 19th century, although part may be earlier; it originally had three storeys. It is now the ASHA Centre, an international retreat and conference venue, and offers B&B accommodation.



Green Bottom (7)

The view from here is in the opposite direction to that from Hazel Hill. The hillside across the valley consists of the various Carboniferous Limestone units, and just beyond the radio masts on top of Edge Hills are the overlying Coal Measures rocks, mainly sandstones. The limestones on this side of the Forest of Dean Basin dip steeply westwards (away from you) at 60–70°. Below the Carboniferous Limestone are Old Red Sandstone rocks, with much of the lower ground and hillside on which you are standing consisting of Brownstones. Green Bottom is a typical Forest hamlet of scattered cottages, although some have now been converted into up-market homes. There is a Beulah Chapel and some Grade II listed limekilns. However, probably Green Bottom’s main claim to fame is that poet Leonard Clark (1905–81), who spent his childhood in nearby Cinderford, wrote about the area in his books *Green Wood* and *A Fool in the Forest*. Chestnuts Wood, on your right as you climb the hill here, figures prominently in these.

Welshbury Hill Fort (8)

The Iron Age Welshbury Hill Fort is not large (3.3 acres), but quite impressive, even though covered in trees. The layout is unusual, with triple ramparts and ditches to the south and west, and a single rampart and ditch to the north and east. The rather complex entrance is in the southeastern corner. An iron spearhead, possibly of Roman origin, was found here in 1987, and a rare late Iron Age electrum coin, of Celtic origin, was found just below the fort. Welshbury may be the site where a raiding party of Vikings was besieged by a victorious Saxon army in the early 10th century. The hill fort was one of the targets for a recent airborne LIDAR (light detection and ranging) survey, in which laser light from an aircraft is reflected

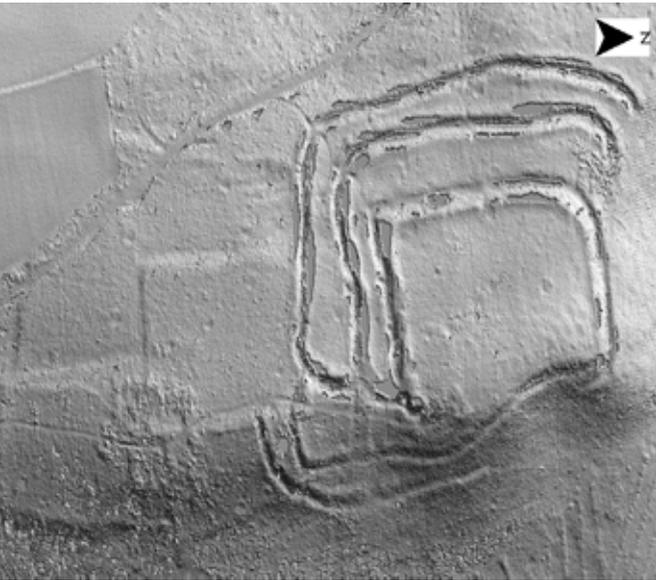


Image courtesy of Forest Research, based on Forestry Commission and Unit for Landscape Modelling data.

off the ground. The great advantage of this technique, compared with conventional aerial photography, is that it can, to a large extent, 'see' archaeological and other man-made features through tree cover. It is thus especially useful in areas like the Forest of Dean, which was one of the first places used to validate the method. Note that the image also reveals other features, such as probable field boundaries, nearby. Further details can be found at www.forestresearch.gov.uk/lidar.

Flaxley Abbey (9)

This Cistercian abbey was founded between 1148 and 1154 by Roger, Earl of Hereford, near the spot in the Vale of Castiard where his father, Milo (Miles) of Gloucester, was killed whilst out hunting in 1143 (see *Walk 6*). The name suggests that flax was grown here before the site was given to the Cistercians. The abbey was initially favoured by the Crown and it was granted land by both Henry II and Henry III. However, after the Dissolution in 1536, its lands and manor were granted to Sir William Kingston, the Constable of the Tower of London. Much of the abbey appears to have been in disrepair by 1515, and was presumably demolished soon after 1536, apart from the western cloistral range which became the manor house, still known as Flaxley Abbey. In 1648 it was sold to merchants William and James Boeve (later Boevey) of London's Dutch community. William Boevey carried out extensive alterations in the late 17th century, including a brick extension on the east side of the main range, and an orangery. The house was inherited by Thomas Crawley, who assumed the name Crawley-Boevey, in 1726. The northern part of Flaxley Abbey was destroyed by fire in 1777, following which the house was largely rebuilt to designs by Anthony Keck. The destroyed section was replaced by a cross wing matching that on



the south end, and a new block on the southeast side provided an entrance hall flanked by principal rooms, all being decorated in Adam style. There were further refinements in the 19th century, and extensive repairs and alterations were carried out after 1960, when the house was bought by F. B. Watkins, a local industrialist, from the Crawley-Boevey family. It remains a private house. Formal gardens were laid out around the house by William Boevey and completed, after his death in 1692, by his wife Catharina, but they had largely been removed by the late 18th century. However, they were restored after 1960 to a modified plan. Today only a few remnants of the original abbey survive, mainly in the west wing, notably the late 12th-century rib-vaulted undercroft and two tunnel-vaulted chambers of the reredorter (latrines), with the 14th century hall or great chamber, possibly the Abbot's Lodgings or Guest Hall, above. A lower range to the east of the wing, occupied after the 1960s by the Bow Room, incorporates part of the walls of the southern cloistral range, and part of south wall of the nave survives in the orangery. Catharina Boevey (1669–1726) was the original of the 'Perverse Widow' in Joseph Addison's and Richard Steele's *Days with Sir Roger de Coverley* (1711). She was also a noted benefactor of the poor and supported a charity school.

Flaxley Church (10)

This may have originated as the gateway chapel of Flaxley Abbey. After the Dissolution it became the parish church, but was rebuilt in 1856 by Sir George Gilbert Scott, in red grit and grey Forest stone. The interior is richly decorated; there is a monument to Abraham Clark (died 1683) and tablets to the Crawley-Boevey family, who purchased the abbey in 1648. Today it is hard to believe that during the 17th century a charcoal furnace and two forges belonging to the Flaxley Estate operated on the Westbury Brook below the abbey. In the early 18th century, Flaxley Abbey ironworks included three forges, and several forges operated upstream of the abbey until at least the early 1780s. By the end of the century the ironworks, described as very large and extensive, were run by John Soule and the furnace was fed mainly with Lancashire ore shipped to Newnham. The forges hammered the iron into bars, ploughshares, and other items. The furnace was apparently abandoned in the early 1800s, but the forges probably remained in use for several more years.

Flaxley Mill (11)

Flaxley Mill House dates from before 1633 (the date on an iron fireback). The adjacent former corn mill is probably about 1750, and has a wheel pit.

Abenhall Church (12)

Abenhall is a tiny, ancient hamlet on the Flaxley to Mitcheldean road. It is notable for its Church of St Michael, built of local red sandstone. The original chapel-of-ease is late 13th century, the south aisle was added in the early 14th, and the tower in the 15th century. The beautiful mid-15th century octagonal font has the carved emblems of the free miners and smiths, as well as the arms of several noble families. The outside west wall of the tower has a modern carving of a shield with the arms of the free miners. The Pyrke family are commemorated by a brass to Richard (died 1609) and an early 18th century tablet. Just opposite the church is Church Farm House, built in 1858 for Edmund Probyn (datestone). The adjacent farm buildings are mostly of similar date, but parts are earlier. They include a cart shed, barn, stable, cow house, open-fronted shed, and a 2-storey building, the upper floor used as granary. Together they form a good example of a little-altered set of mid-19th century farm buildings.



Fairplay Iron Mine (13)

The most extensive remains of Fairplay Iron Mine are of a Cornish underbeam engine house over a masonry shaft about 350 feet deep. The date of construction of the stone and brick engine house is uncertain, but sinking of the deep pit appears to have begun by 1856. There was also a long drainage level to Nailbridge, and even a connection to the Westbury Brook tramroad. The object of the venture appears to have been to exploit iron ore in the Drybrook Sandstone, but there is no evidence for any significant production. In fact, it is said that the owners “put more iron into the mine than they ever got out”. The Westbury Brook workings proved that the ore diminished and ran out at the deep boundary with Fairplay Pit, so sinking the latter was a waste of time; maybe it was a financial scam! The Westbury Brook Mine machinery and a large quantity of tramroad rails were sold in 1907 by the Chastan Syndicate, then owners of both Fairplay and the Lea Bailey Gold Mine (another abortive venture: *see Walk 11*). About 100 yards to

the east of the engine house are the filled-in remains of an air shaft with a draught opening or flue connecting the shaft to the base of an associated stone ventilation chimney, complete with hearth. These were conserved in 1980. To the south of the shafts are three small reservoir ponds for boiler water, now nature reserves. The whole area has been well mined and quarried, as, within a few hundred yards of Fairplay Mine to the west, at least three collieries once worked the Coleford High Delf Seam: Addis Hill, Inkerman and Gorbroom. After 1873 Addis Hill became part of Haywood Colliery, coal being raised through the Haywood Pit (a mile or so to the south). There was only intermittent activity at these pits during the early 20th century, and all were abandoned by about 1935. The stone-lined Gorbroom Level can still be seen in the woods.

