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Museum of Cannock Chase

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South Staffordshire Council

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Staffordshire County Council

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Staffordshire County Council

Museums Officer
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How You Can Help

- Act as the eyes and ears of the AONB
- Consider ways of conserving and enhancing the AONB
- Act in environmentally friendly and socially responsible ways when visiting the countryside

If you want advice or feel you can help, please contact:

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Freda's Footsteps or
Cannock Chase AONB

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Should you or someone you know require it, this leaflet can also be produced, on request, in large print. Please telephone 01889 882613 or fax 01889 883912.

Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is supported by: Defra, Staffordshire County Council, Cannock Chase Council, Stafford Borough Council, Lichfield District Council, South Staffordshire Council, AONB Parish and Town Councils, British Horse Society, Cemex UK Operations Ltd, Country Land and Business Association, Forestry Commission, Friends of Cannock Chase, Hanson Aggregates, National Farmers Union, Natural England, Ramblers, CASS Young Carers, Staffordshire Parish Councils' Association, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, Swinnerton Cycles Forest Centre Ltd, Walton Chasers, West Midland Bird Club.



Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

History





Cannock Chase AONB - an historic landscape

At the time of the Domesday Book (1086), the area between the rivers Trent, Sow, Penk and Tame was a Royal Forest known as Cank Forest. 'Forest' was a legal term for an area managed for hunting by the King and was not necessarily wooded.

In the late 13th century, rights of 'Chase' for hunting were granted to the Bishop of Lichfield. The Bishop constructed a deerpark and hunting lodge at Beaudesert. This area was enclosed by an earthen bank and internal ditch probably topped by a wooden fence. The area outside the deerpark was mostly uninhabited, but was important to surrounding settlements for fuel, building materials, tools and for grazing sheep, cattle and pigs. Small industries were also developing on the Chase, for example, mining, ironworking, charcoal burning and quarrying.

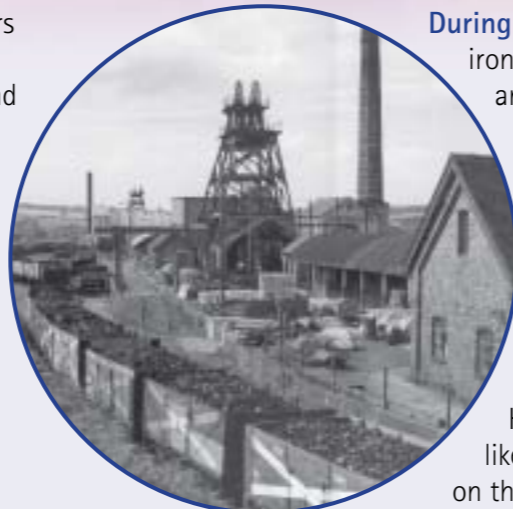


By 1540, Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries reached its height. While there were no monasteries on the Chase, large areas of it were owned by the church. Beaudesert was confiscated by the Crown who, in turn, sold it to Sir William Paget (lawyer, statesman and royal advisor).

Courtesy of Beaudesert Trust.

The Pagets converted Beaudesert into a manor house and, recognising the good supply of ironstone, wood and water power, particularly from Rising Brook, developed iron production close by.

The excavation of 'bell pits' for mining and using trees for charcoal production to smelt iron ore, further altered the landscape. The open heathland landscape was then maintained by people who cut and burnt bracken, used heather for brushes, mattresses and thatching and ate the bilberries.



Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Cannock Chase. Copyright NCB.

During the 18th century, as coke replaced charcoal, iron production ended on the Chase. Coal mining and quarrying expanded, increasing the size of local populations. Initially, coal mining had been small scale, with coal extracted near the surface and supplied to local markets. As technology improved and demand increased, deeper and more elaborate mines were sunk. The opening of the Trent and Mersey as well as the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canals enabled coal to be transported further afield. Hednesford became a town and new settlements like Chasetown and Chase Terrace sprang up on the heathland. Railways further improved the transport network. During the 20th century, demand for coal changed and the mines gradually closed. The last working pit on the Chase coalfield was the Littleton Pit at Huntington which closed in 1993.

During the 19th century, some local landowners re-introduced trees to the area with plantations established near Shugborough and around Beaudesert. However, most of these trees were felled during the Great War (1914 - 1918). The Forestry Commission was established in 1919 to improve UK timber reserves and began to acquire land on the Chase for tree planting.

In recent history, military uses have played a big role in shaping the Chase. During the Great War, there were training camps near Rugeley and at Brocton. Water, power, social facilities, a hospital and transport links were provided. The 'Tackeroo' railway brought supplies of building materials, food and fuel.

Penkridge Bank Road. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Cannock Chase. Copyright unknown.



Military hospital. Copyright unknown.

After the war, the hospital continued to treat cases of shell shock and gas attack. It was closed in 1924 and the site was taken over by the West Cannock Colliery Company to house miners and their families. The area became known as Brindley Village, huts from the camps were used, a school was established and the hospital chapel was rededicated as St. Mary's Church. All existed until the 1950s when the miners were re-housed north of Hednesford. The school closed in 1957. Remains of the hospital can still be seen.

During World War II a new camp was built, between Brindley Heath and Marquis Drive, for RAF basic training. Arrivals came to RAF Hednesford by rail to Moor's Gorse. Then they hauled their kit up 'Kitbag Hill' to the camp. The camp was used until the 1950s. By the mid 1960s, Staffordshire County Council acquired this and other areas of land, including over 2000 hectares in the north west of the Chase gifted by the 3rd Earl of Lichfield. This formed the basis of the Country Park now managed by Staffordshire County Council.

Military reminders still exist on the Chase today. The German military cemetery was created in the 1960s. Germans who died in Britain during both World Wars were reburied here. In the nearby Commonwealth cemetery rest principally German, New Zealander and British war dead.

Also on the Chase is the Katyn Memorial to the 14,000 Polish people executed in the Katyn Forest in 1940.

Today, Cannock Chase AONB is a peaceful and tranquil area. Shaped by history, it is a vital landscape to conserve and enhance for the future.

Commonwealth Cemetery. Courtesy of June Jukes.



Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

Today Cannock Chase is a living and working environment of vital importance from a conservation point of view. The special nature of Cannock Chase was formally recognised in 1958 when it was designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This leaflet gives a flavour of the history which has helped to shape Cannock Chase as we know it today.

Castle Ring is the highest point on Cannock Chase (242 metres above sea level) and is the largest Iron Age hill fort in Staffordshire. Castle Ring would have contained round houses, grain stores and animals and would have been a refuge for communities in times of trouble. Castle Ring is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument and its defensive ditches and banks survive today.



Castle Ring

Photos: Chris Blackburn

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