

# Old Roar Gill Ancient Gill Woodland

**Briefing paper, March 2024**

## **Introduction**

This briefing paper has been written following the 14 Feb 2024 landslip at the top, eastern part of Old Roar Gill. It outlines the importance of ancient gill woodlands, their landscape and biodiversity value, their management to conserve and enhance biodiversity, and their national and local designations.

The paper makes no judgement as to the cause of the landslip but is restricted to describing the habitat characteristics of Old Roar Gill and the potential implications the landslip may have on the habitat and unique diversity of species associated with ancient gill woodlands.

## **What is Ancient Woodland?**

Ancient woodland in England is defined as an area that has been wooded continuously since at least 1600 AD.<sup>1</sup>

Ancient woodland is a nationally important and threatened habitat, and its existence over hundreds of years has preserved irreplaceable ecological and historical features. They have developed complex ecosystems and are host to rare and specialist communities of plants, fungi, insects, and other fauna. Gill streams in the Weald are particularly renowned for their rare and endangered bryophyte (liverwort and moss) and fern communities.

The South-East has approximately 40% of the ancient woodland in England.<sup>2</sup> Ancient woodland covers only 2.5% of the land cover of the UK.<sup>3</sup> The UK government identifies ancient woodland as an irreplaceable habitat and gives it the highest level of protection in the national planning policy framework.<sup>4</sup>

## **National and County-wide Ancient Woodland Inventories**

Ancient woodland sites over 2 hectares in size are recorded in the county Ancient Woodland Inventories compiled in the 1980's and 1990's by the Nature Conservancy Council. The county inventories were collated and published by the Nature Conservancy Council as the National Ancient Woodland Inventory.

From 2008-2010 a partnership of organisations including the Forestry Commission, Natural England, the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Unit, Sussex Biodiversity Records Centre, the South Downs National Park Authority, and local authorities established the Weald and Downs Ancient Woodland Survey to revise the ancient woodland inventory in the Weald and Downs of Sussex and Kent.

A Revision of the Ancient Woodland Inventory for Hastings Borough, Report and Inventory Maps, was published in August 2010.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ancient-woodland-ancient-trees-and-veteran-trees-advice-for-making-planning-decisions)

<sup>2</sup> [Hastings AWI survey report- front cover only](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Ancient Woodland - British Habitats - Woodland Trust](#)

<sup>4</sup> [National Planning Policy Framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [A review of the revision of the Ancient Woodland Inventory in the South East - NERR042 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](#)

Old Roar Gill is identified as Ancient Woodland in both the original and revised inventories and is identified on Defra's digital maps of UK-wide designated landscape sites.<sup>6</sup> The extent of the ancient woodland at Old Roar Gill is shown on the attached maps.

### **Gill Woodlands in the Weald of South-East England<sup>7</sup>**

Old Roar Gill, as well as being an area of ancient woodland, is characterised as a gill woodland of the Weald of Sussex. In the Weald of Sussex, Surrey and Kent, much of the woodland occurs in distinct valleys, locally called gills. A gill is a deeply incised valley in the landscape which may, or may not, be wooded. Gills usually have a stream at their base which has historically eroded the surrounding sandstone to form a ravine. The sides of gills can be precipitous with small waterfalls, pools, and seepages.

The gill woodlands of the South-East provide a unique ecosystem, with an assemblage of specialist plants not found anywhere else in Europe. Ancient gill woodlands are particularly biodiverse in lower plant communities with significantly higher bryophyte diversity and numbers than surrounding ancient woodland sites.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of tree clearance, together with the presence of steep slopes, cliffs, stream-side boulders and waterfalls in Wealden gills has allowed the survival of many bryophytes and fern assemblages that are unique east of Exmoor and Dartmoor, and the far North of England. In addition, many of the gills in Sussex support 'sandrock' outcrops of exposed sandstone which are internationally important in their own right.

The steep sided nature of gills has ensured that many gill woodlands have remained untouched and undisturbed by human activity making them unique in terms of biodiversity.<sup>9</sup> Many steep-sided ravines have proved impossible to bring into cultivation, or development and remain as dense wooded areas, although cultivation and development can occur up the edge of the gill valleys.

For many gills, non-intervention is likely to be the best management option, particularly where there is no evidence of a past management of coppicing or woodland-grazed pasture, and where gills are of a steep-sided wooded nature where management would be unsafe and unproductive.<sup>10</sup>

Managing the gill in this way also allows rainfall and overland run-off to be captured and slowed down through the natural process.<sup>11</sup> This management option is exemplified at Old Roar Gill.

### **Management of Ancient Woodland and Ancient Gill Woodland**

Ancient woodland is not homogenous. There is therefore no single management prescription for ancient woodland or ancient gill woodland. There are different types of ancient woodland

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<sup>6</sup> [MAGIC \(defra.gov.uk\)](https://defra.gov.uk/magic)

<sup>7</sup> Weald Gill Woodlands by Francis Rose and John Patmore, English Nature, Sussex and Surrey.

<sup>8</sup> <https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/4752179/Andrew+Flint+PhD+2014+CD+Rom+version+-+scanned+signature.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/discover/around-sussex/wetland-habitats/wet-woodland>

<sup>10</sup> <https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/4752179/Andrew+Flint+PhD+2014+CD+Rom+version+-+scanned+signature.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [Wet woodland | Sussex Wildlife Trust](#)

with differing characteristics depending on geographical location and historical land management. Some ancient woodlands have been subject to cyclical coppicing, some used as a grazed pasture, and some have no management intervention.

Historically the steep sided nature of gill valleys mean they are difficult to bring under cultivation or any type of regular management, resulting in them remaining under continuous woodland.<sup>12</sup> Old Roar Gill has not been subject to coppicing, grazing or other types of wood extraction, mainly due to its steep-sided slopes and difficult access.

The steep-sided ancient gill woodlands of the Weald are the oldest and least-disturbed woodlands in the South-East.<sup>13</sup> Many display the characteristics of Old Roar Gill: lack of access, steep-sided wooded slopes, gill streams with wet flushes and pools with rare flora and fauna.

The northern area of Old Roar Gill is the steepest-sided Wealden ancient gill stream habitat in the Borough, and is representative of the unique and biodiverse gill stream habitats in the Weald. The continued existence of ancient woodland gill stream habitats such as Old Roar Gill means their species composition may resemble woodland communities that existed in prehistoric times.

Other ancient gill woodlands in Hastings such as Marline Valley Woods and Church Wood are shallower-sided gills that display past signs of regular coppice management whilst the steep sided ancient gill woodlands of Fairlight Glen, Ecclesbourne Glen and Old Roar Gill have no history of coppice management.

Fairlight Glen, Ecclesbourne Glen and Old Roar Gill have a non-intervention management approach that aims to preserve the high canopy of the ancient woodland habitat and the unique characteristics of the gill stream ecology. This management approach recognises the unique importance of ancient gill woodland and their internationally important plant communities. It allows the tree canopy to remain closed, providing a unique 'micro-climate' which benefits the rare and characteristic bryophytes and ferns. Selective felling, coppicing and other forms of management result in increased level of light to the woodland floor, affecting and changing the delicate ecosystem of closed-canopy ancient gill woodlands.

Retaining the high and closed canopy through non-intervention management is consistent with the management aims of other woodland gill stream habitats in the Weald; to conserve and enhance biodiversity, reduce adverse impacts, and maintain an unspoilt feeling in the gill.<sup>14</sup>

A recent study of bryophytes in Old Roar Gill by Tom Ottley<sup>15</sup> identified several rare species growing in abundance and in quantities not seen in any other gill or similar location either in Hastings, such as Fairlight Glen, or in other parts of the UK. The wet outcrops of sandstone rock support colonies of moss that are particularly rare in Sussex. The survey report concludes that the quantity of rare species in Old Roar Gill is impressive, and the management of the Gill beneficial to the bryophyte communities and rare plant assemblages.

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<sup>12</sup>

<https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/4752179/Andrew+Flint+PhD+2014+CD+Rom+version+-+scanned+signature.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [highweald.org/document-library/aonb-management-plan/high-weald-managment-plan-4th-edition-2019-2024/?layout=default](http://highweald.org/document-library/aonb-management-plan/high-weald-managment-plan-4th-edition-2019-2024/?layout=default)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.crowboroughtowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/6.2-Ghyll-Management-Plan-2021-25.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Bryophytes in Old Roar Gill 2014, Private survey by Tom Ottley

Studies of the unique ecology of Wealden gill stream habitats conclude that more research is needed to understand the multiple factors that make up this unique ecosystem, however the outcome of studies in Old Roar Gill demonstrate the management approach adopted, to preserve the high canopy and undisturbed nature of the habitat, make it one of the most important preserves of rare and characteristic species, anywhere in the UK. <sup>16</sup>

The parts of the woodland which are accessible by the public are subject to Health and Safety management intervention only, such as felling dangerous trees, an approach consistent with all woodland management in the borough that is accessible by the public.

### **The recent Landslip and its impact on the ancient gill woodland habitat**

The landslip has resulted in significant amounts of soil dislodging from a specific area of one of the steepest slopes of the gill. The vegetation and trees that were associated with this area of the slope have slid into the ravine, resulting in an area of exposed mud and clay. The exposed slope is now denuded of woodland cover. The increased light on this exposed area is likely to encourage the proliferation of scrub type plants which are not wholly characteristic of a closed-canopy ancient gill woodland.

Some of the materials that have ended up in the gill include garden soil, garden plants, and non-natural materials associated with domestic gardens. The presence of nutrient-rich, domestic garden soil provides opportunities for garden plants to flourish in an environment in which they would not hitherto have been present.

Nutrient-rich soils and domestic plants which are not characteristic of the habitat are likely to have a detrimental impact upon the rare and unique plant species of the ancient woodland gill. Ancient gill woodland bryophytes and ferns grow slowly over centuries on nutrient-poor soils. These nutrient-sensitive plants are likely to be adversely impacted and out-competed by more vigorous garden plants and nutrient-rich soils which have ended up in the gill.

The impact of the landslide on the unique biodiversity and ecosystem of the Wealden ancient gill wood of Old Roar Gill is difficult to ascertain, but is likely to be detrimental. To understand the impact of the landslide on the habitat and its unique flora and fauna, long-term field studies and analysis of the biodiversity of the site will be required.

## **Old Roar Gill Local Plan Designations**

### **Local Nature Reserve**

Hastings Borough Council declared Old Roar Gill a Local Nature Reserve, LNR, in 2002 in recognition of the site's importance as ancient woodland and its unique position in the urban landscape of the borough. The extent of the Local Nature Reserve is shown on the attached maps.

Local authorities can designate Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) on their land under the provisions of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.<sup>17</sup> LNRs are declared for their local importance for wildlife, geology, education, and enjoyment. It is not a formal requirement that an LNR is open to the public but at least part of it should be publicly accessible.

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<sup>16</sup> Bryophytes in Old Roar Gill 2014, Private survey by Tom Ottley

<sup>17</sup> [National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1949/11)

## Local Wildlife Site

Local Wildlife Sites are identified by local planning authorities as part of their network of non-statutory sites of importance for nature conservation. They have a significant role to play in meeting national and local biodiversity objectives, representing local character and distinctiveness, and contributing to the quality of life and well-being of local communities.<sup>18</sup> The Local Wildlife Site boundary is shown on the attached maps.

Old Roar Gill has been recognised through subsequent Local Plans as part of the wider network of Local Wildlife Sites in the borough since 1996. Both Local Nature Reserves and Local Wildlife Sites are shown on the Local Plan proposals map, and protected by specific planning policies.<sup>19</sup>

Local Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites and ancient woodland continue to be recognised and protected under national planning policy frameworks.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [\[ARCHIVED CONTENT\] \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Local Nature Reserve and Local Wildlife Site map for Hastings](#)

<sup>20</sup> [National Planning Policy Framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)