

THE
MYSTERY OF THE BITHOLMES
HUNTING TOWER
IN THE EWDEN VALLEY



Michael Dyson

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Introduction

I have had a long interest in our local Red Deer population on the outskirts of Sheffield¹. Whilst undertaking a deer study regarding the ancient Wharnccliffe herd, I became intrigued with the Bitholmes hunting tower, it is long since gone but the site is visible from the Wharnccliffe Lodge (Fig.1. cover photo, taken in the 1990s).

I first became aware of the tower due to a reference in the book, *The History of Penistone* by Dransfield (1906), he says -

Hunting towers were in former times frequently built in the neighbourhood of residences of the great, for the purpose, we are told, of "giving the ladies of those days an opportunity of enjoying the sport of hunting". There is one at Chatsworth.

*"On yon bold brow a lordly tower
In that soft vale a lady's bower
In yonder meadow, far away
The turrets of a cloister gray*

The tower was situated within a Deer Forest, on the lands owned by, Gilbert the Earl of Shrewsbury (1553-1616), based at Sheffield Castle. Whilst it will be difficult to prove he built the tower, he was very keen on hunting. If this is so then the origin of the tower may date to around the latter half of the 16th century. The Red Deer or *Tall Deer* as they were called would have been the main species in hunted. The Talbot dynasty shared their name with a breed of hunting dog which they showed in their heraldic emblems and some of their tombs with a notable one at Sheffield Cathedral.

The woodland and fields in question are now owned by the *Woodland Trust* which is a conservation charity concerned with the creation, protection, and restoration of our native woodland heritage.

After many years of trying to locate the site of the Tower I am still uncertain as to its exact location. I hope that this information may inspire someone to solve the mystery.

1 I first saw the herd of red deer at Wharnccliffe in the 1950s and later saw them regularly as a forestry worker in the 1990s. I was asked to undertake a report as to their status and I also examined the history of this ancient herd. The Bitholmes Wood became a refuge when Wharnccliffe was opened up to various public activities. Sadly I believe this historic herd may become extinct. However there is a possibility that in time the area may be re-colonised from elsewhere, as has happened with the Roe deer.

The Location and the meaning of the name Bitholmes

There are various spellings of the *Bitholmes*, for example; *Bithoms*, *Bithums*, *Bytholmes*, *Bethums* and various pronunciations but referred to locally as *the bith'ms*. The exact meaning is not known but there is a Holmes Farm at the confluence of the two rivers nearby (flat ground near a river). The Bitholmes *area* is evidently not confined to the ancient wood as we have *Bitholmes Farm* to the north and *Bitholmes House* to the south, about a mile apart. There is a reference (1647) concerning the *Bitholms* Lead mine just south of Ewden Beck²



Fig.2. Many years ago I indicated (circled) what I then believed to be the location. SK293961 (1950s OS map).

The site is situated on a steep spur in the lower Ewden Valley as it meets the Don Valley. The area is known locally as the *Saddle Back*. The Hare Hills Lane is a very old track that passed through More Hall Farm and Hollin Edge Farm.

According to local knowledge these farms stabled pack horses and refreshment was provided. It was in fact a major route until 1805 when the Manchester road was built. Note the denoted *Disused Pit* which was immediately above the marked site. Extraction of minerals took place here for a short period in the 1940s. A mechanised track way carried tubs towards the west which accessed onto More Hall Lane. A sandstone crag runs along the top of Bitholmes Wood but diminishes near the marked location (see map in the appendix).

² Kenworthy, J. 1915 *The early History of the Stocksbridge District. Lead mining in the Ewden Valley.*

The Tower in Context with the “Sheffield Deer Forest”³

The origin and development of the forest and the relationship with the Tower is very obscure, changing in size and ownership over the centuries with very little documentation. In fact the Forest in its entirety appears not to have possessed a name.

Regarding the various Lords of Sheffield Manor, Hey⁴ says that,

The Deer had been hunted by the Louvetots, Furnivals and Talbots but in the early seventeenth century the absentee Howards showed little interest and hunting ceased and the deer removed.

At the *Quo Warranto* (a writ to prove a right) in 1281 Thomas de Furnival claimed that his ancestors had enjoyed hunting rights since the time of the conquest. Potentially the first Forest covered a vast area bounded by the Rivers Derwent⁵ to the west and the Don (or Little Don?) to the north and east. What is not clear is when and how the Forest operated and at what period the Bitholmes Tower may have been used, evidently it must have been during its earlier larger phase.

Hey gives some detail regarding the Rivelin area and says that by the end of the 13th century the Rivelin Forest, firth or chase, extended from Malin Bridge towards Bell Hagg and Whitley Wood then up along the porter Brook to Stanage along the edge to Moscar and back down along the Rivelin Ridge to Malin Bridge (the confluence of the Loxley and Rivelin). Unfortunately Hey does not give much detail about the rest of the “Sheffield Forest”. Hey only says that its area was similar to the district of *Hallamshire*. However, there is a major discrepancy with the Sheffield townships which could never have been part of the Forest and also the area north of the Little Don.

As time went on the hunting Forest area inevitably became reduced with the growth of habitation and livestock rearing. The latter did not necessarily interfere with the hunting of deer but the more remote moorland areas would have become increasingly used.

The Norman Lords created many sub-manors for their leading followers, for example at Bolsterstone, Midhope and Wadsley. However they were dependent on the succession of earls at Sheffield Castle, and presumably subservient as regards the hunting of deer. The organisation of the Midhope - Bolsterstone sub manors is particularly complex.

3 Deer *Forests, Firths and Chases* should not to be confused with Deer *Parks*; they are totally different and served a different purpose. Sheffield Castle had a large deer park which was contained by a fence. The various breeds of deer provided readily available meat. Stannington Hall and Wadsley Manor Parks were also within the original Forest area but virtually nothing is known about these two ancient parks.

4 Hey David. 2002 *Historic Hallamshire*. Landmark Press.

5 The River Derwent was the boundary of the Peak Forest which occupied the whole of the North-West corner of the county of Derbyshire. Its very ancient origins are well documented by Brooksbank Rev. J H. *Forest of the Peak*. HAS vol.1.1914-18.

T W Hall ⁶ tells us that sometime before 1290 Sir Heyas de Midhope confirmed a grant to William son of Cecillatte Cross, of one piece of land in the area of Wytewell and Midhope. It bordered on the River Don and the Unsliven bridge area. The grant also included that there should be pasture for the deer from Hermetrode to Lumbelode. Hermit Royd was located next to Ewden Beck, near the Bitholmes (see photo Fig.4). The location of Lumbelode is not known, but may translate to a pool in a river. I suspect that it did not extend very far from Hermit Royd, perhaps somewhere along Ewden Beck. The deer *pasture* specified may have been otherwise known as a *Lawn*, an open space of grassland where the deer would be encouraged to graze. There was such an example at Rivelin, near present day *Lawns Farm*.

Hunter⁷ gives an early reference to deer hunting in the Ewden Valley;-

In 1290 Sir Elias de Midope was granted free warren in Penisale, Midope, Langside, Ewden, Horderne, Waldershelf, Mitheldende and Barnside. Waldershelf byerlaw lies to the north of Ewden Beck with Westnall (Westmonhalgh) to the South. The latter is not mentioned suggesting that Ewden Beck was the southern extent. Other places mentioned extend westward as far as the River Derwent and the Peak Forest. The northern boundary would presumably have been the River Don beginning at its source near Dunford.

This Hallamshire sub-manor of Midhope became a matter of dispute and I can find no other reference to hunting in the Ewden valley.

In 1299 Dionysia, the widow of Elias, gave to William de Sheffeud her sonall her lands at Barnside, with Henry de Barnside her native, and her whole wood at Ewden, to hold at a rent of 60s, for the term of her life.

Hunter says that,

Eventually the manor of Bolsterstone reverted to the chief lords, and the first Talbot earl of Shrewsbury held a court of the manor in 1442.

Hunter also says that, after Gilbert Talbot's death [1616];-

Bolsterstone passed with Sheffield to the three coheirs of Earl Gilbert. The Earl of Pembroke who married one of them, granted a commission in 1620 to William Green, of Loxley, gent. to be bailiff of his manor of Bolsterstone and of lands in Ewden, Shephouse, Windleden and Aldermanshead and to have oversight of, the game and deer and of the woods there and in the Riverlin and Loxley.

This represents a vast area which largely equates with the early Forest and 1620 would seem to be a surprising late date with most forests in decline at this time.

6 Hall, T W. 1935 *A Descriptive Catalogue of Ancient Charters etc.*

7 Hunter, J. 1831 *South Yorkshire, a history of the Deanery of Doncaster* Vol. 2.

The Documentary Evidence for the Tower.

I have not found any indications of a structure on any maps, which included several detailed Fairbank maps which unfortunately do not extend beyond the Morehall Estate.

Dransfield⁸ refers to the notes of the well respected antiquary John Wilson (1719-1783) of Broomhead Hall. Dransfield says:-

I have to thank the Rev. W R Wilson, the Vicar of Bolsterstone, for kindly furnishing me with the following extract from the notes of Mr John Wilson of Broomhead Hall, referring to the Hunting Tower erected at Bytholmes, near Deepcar, by Gilbert Earl of Shrewsbury [1553-1616].

1743. Bytholmes Tower is now in ruins except a piece of the west wall, which is still standing a yard thick, 8 yards long and 6 yards high being a rough wall filled with mortar, the outside having been pointed. Towards the top is a sort of hollowed tabling or cornice, by which I suppose it to have been originally much higher. The east wall has been the same height and dimensions as the west, the north and south walls only 6 yards long. I suppose the entrance to be on the north side. At the bottom of the west wall a square hole about three quarters of a yard every way, which goes through about the thickness of the wall. It is said to have been built as a stand to look at the deer in Wharnclyffe.

The earliest mention is by John Leland⁹ [he wrote his itinerary between the years 1539-1543]. He is quoted by Dransfield.

“Leland mentions it in his Itinerary, who wrote in Henry VII days. “The close it stands in [is] at the top of the Bytholmes [and] is called Roverfield or Tower Rocher field.

There is a brief reference by Rodger Dodsworth¹⁰ in *Yorkshire Church Notes*, undertaken sometime between 1619 and 1631. Travelling along the route along River Don he refers to *Wharnclyffe Chace*.

....and leaveth the Bethums, a chace and tower of th’Erle of Salop’s on the south side. By Worteley to Wadesley wher in tyme past Everingham of Stainber had a parke, now disparked.

⁸ Dransfield, John Ness. 1906 *The History of Penistone*. Wood.

⁹ Leland, J (1503-1553) has been described as "the father of English local history". His *Itinerary* provided a unique source of observations and raw materials for many subsequent antiquaries, and introduced the county as the basic unit for studying the local history of England, an idea that has been influential ever since. The exact sequence and their dates are uncertain, but there seems to have been five major English itineraries, taken over the years 1539 to 1543.

¹⁰ Dodsworth, R (b1585-1654) At an early age he began collecting Yorkshire church notes and pedigrees, and by 1618 he had begun what eventually became the most monumental collection of antiquarian material bequeathed to us by the 17th century. *Salop* is the old word for Shropshire.



Fig.3. *Hare Hills Field*. The upper part of the field is not cultivated due to the rocky outcrops. (Dyson Photo 1990s). This field is now overgrown with planted trees. I initially believed the Tower may have been at the top of this field but now believe it to have been on the next level (*Saddleback Field*) visible at the top right.



Fig.4. Photograph taken from the Wharnccliffe Lodge area in c 1864¹¹. Note the field at the top right (It is this area that was later mined and now overgrown). The field had long been known as *Saddleback Field*. (Wilkinson pers. comm. 2019. Hollin Edge Farm). *Hermit Royd* is shown in the foreground which was recorded in the 13th century (*le Hermetrode*) and demolished in the mid-20th. Many Flints were recorded nearby in the late 19th century¹².

11 Smith Theophilus. 1864 Wharnccliffe and the Valley of the Don.

12 ArcHeritage 2011 https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-1098-1/dissemination/pdf/archerit1-107755_1.pdf



Fig.5. View from the Plank Gate, Wharnccliffe, date unknown (J M Ambler, Bradfield Archives). *Hare Hills Field, Wilkins Field and Square Fields* were previously associated with More Hall Farm Estate. *Saddleback Field* was historically part of the Wilson - Broomhead Estate. It is now owned by the Wilkinson family of Hollin Edge Farm.

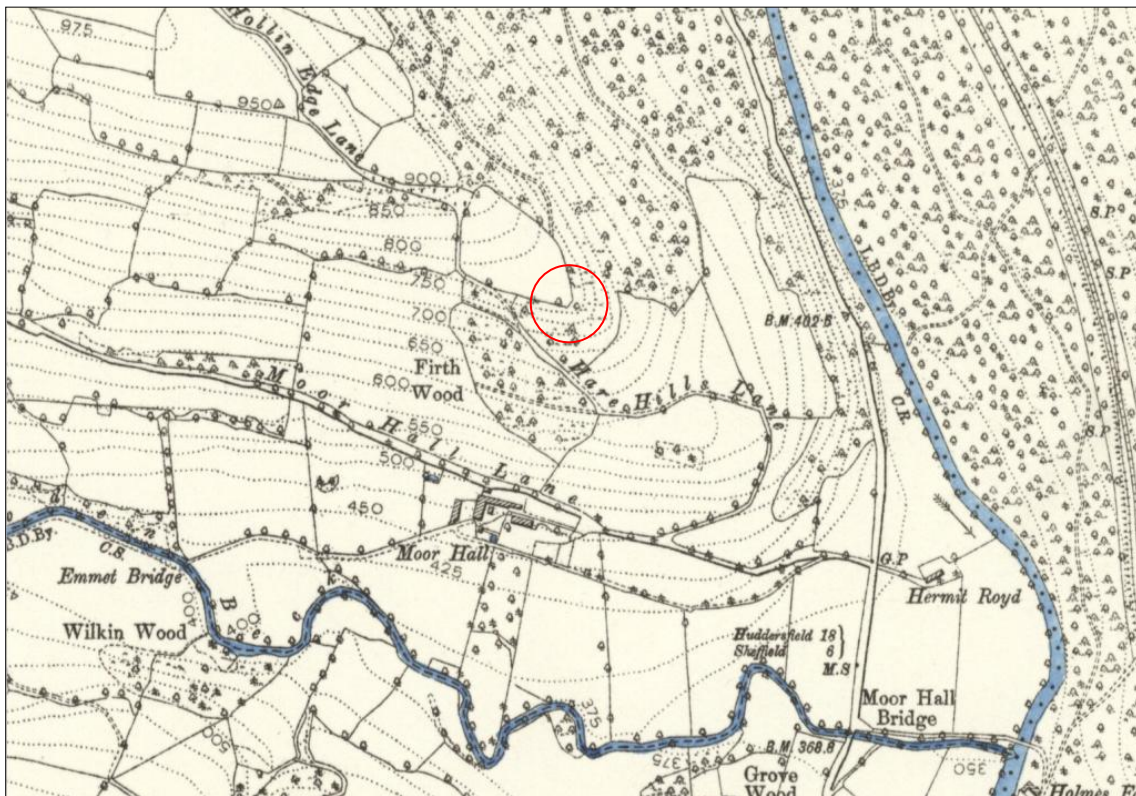


Fig.6. 1842/52 Contour map showing my new proposition (circled).

Discussion

Today hunting towers appear to be a national rarity offering little to which we can make a comparison. A notable exception is the one at Chatsworth which also served as a summer house, however it is of a later date and has been modernised. The Turret House at Manor Lodge Sheffield is of a similar style and may have been used as a viewing “tower”. I doubt if the Bitholmes Tower was such a decorated structure but may like Chatsworth have served as a place to take refreshment or refuge during bad weather.

Dodsworth says it was in a close *at the top of Bitholmes Wood*. If we take this literally then the view of the Ewden valley would have been very restricted because of the lay of the land and is further away from the Ewden Valley. The view of Wharncliffe Chase would have been excellent but pointless.

Despite a search ranging from More Hall to Hollin Edge Farm, I have been unable to find the fields (or field) mentioned in the early accounts, namely *Tower Rocher Field* or *Rover Field*. The field may not of course have existed when the Tower was built or the names may have changed over time. More Hall Farm has a long history with its origins perhaps going back to the sixteenth century and I suspect its fields adjoining the Hare Hills Lane may be of similar age. Strangely neither Morehall nor Hermit Royd is mentioned by the early travellers.

It is interesting that the view from the Tower would have also given a clear view down the Don Valley and to the town of Sheffield (about 7 miles). The valley bottom would have been impassable but I imagine that pack horse routes along the hillside would have enabled visitors on horseback to ride to the Tower. They may have passed through Wadsley (with its Manor and Deer Park), then through Worrall and lastly Brightomlee. We can only speculate that the Ladies would make this journey in order to watch the days hunting and take refreshment in the Tower.

I wonder how the early travellers, in particular, Leland and Dodsworth passed along the Bitholmes. A turnpike road was built as late as 1805 when it was said that there was *no evidence of even a track* (*Stocksbridge History Society*). Dodsworth appears to travel from the north. I wonder if he used *Hare Hills Lane*, it is interesting that a very old stretch hollow way has survived along this route passing very near the proposed tower site.

... and leaveth Bithums, a chase and tower of the Earl of Salop on the south side.

It is difficult to say when the Tower was built but John Wilson (1743) probably quoting Dodsworth, stated that it was erected by Gilbert Earl of Shrewsbury [1553-1616]. If correct then it is likely that hunting in the area had been carried out a century or more before the tower was built. Similarly, the date of its last use is unclear but Dodsworth suggests it was still in use up to the early 1600s, perhaps a little later if the recorded presence of the deer keeper is considered (see previous quote by Hunter).

No doubt the Tower was built essentially to view the deer hunting in the Ewden Valley but it also overlooked the Don Valley. The Don was the boundary to the Worley's land and Wharncliffe Chase which was formed in 1252 by an act of Free Warren.

It has been said (Wilson) that spectators overlooked the deer on Wharncliffe which is possible but probably incidental. The deer would have roamed freely across river boundaries. However, the huntsmen would most likely, not have crossed the River in pursuit. It is well documented that neighbouring landowners did not always get along with each other.

Hunter relates that Thomas Wortley made many hunting trips to the Forest of the Peak taking with him longbows and hounds. Perhaps giving us a rare example as to how hunting in the forests was carried out.

Many times he would go into the Forest of the Peak and set up there his tent with great provisions of vitals, having in his company many worshipful persons, with his own familye, and would remain there for seven weeks or more.

When hunting the far reaches of the Forest the Talbots would no doubt have been away for many days if not weeks. Travelling to these areas would not have been easy especially when using at best, dirt tracks.

It is surprising that many of the more recent historians did not find the Tower of any interest. Joseph Hunter (1819) pays little attention and confuses deer *parks* with deer *forests*, a common error to this day;-

At Bitholmes a deer park belonging to the Earls of Shrewsbury, with a tower in it to overlook the deer.

This quote was probably partly based on the Wilson account who had said, (see previous quote)... *a Tower to overlook the deer on Wharncliffe.*

As far as I am aware Joseph Kenworthy (1852-1929) did not mention the Tower although he wrote extensively about a multitude of topics concerning the Stocksbridge area, He was a friend of John N Dransfield who was evidently interested in the Tower and very keen about all types of hunting.

I have explored the site many times since the 1990s but I have failed to find any remains, or any re-used stone. Remnants of old walls show only rough thin stone. The remains noted historically were said to be 6 by 8 yards long and suggest a substantial structure. Wilson says that the walls were made of rough stone and filled with mortar, the outside being pointed. I would imagine that some foundations may remain albeit now concealed underground.

My updated theory is that the Tower site is slightly above (N.W.) to my initial proposition as shown on the map (Fig.2.). After studying the contour map (Fig. 6.) and looking again at the site it gives a much more elevated view of the Ewden Valley which I am sure was its main purpose, at the same time it also overlooks the Don valley and Wharnccliffe. I can find no other location that seems so ideally situated.



Fig.7. Saddleback Field was at the top of this slope which I now believe may have been the location of the Tower. A hollow way passes to the left.



Fig.8. The area at the top showing the old field wall. The mined area is immediately behind the photographer.

The site is located on a rare piece of level ground at the very bottom end of what was called *Saddleback Field* (Figs 5 and 6.) which was mined in the 1940s. As it is situated on the very edge there is a possibility that the site may have been undisturbed by the mining (see photo Fig.8.). There is a mound and a depression and an old field wall otherwise there are no definite features.

Some future archaeological exploration may be useful in helping to solve the mystery.

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Fig.9. View from the Wharncliffe Craggs (1990s). Some years ago these ancient fields were planted with trees and are now unrecognisable.

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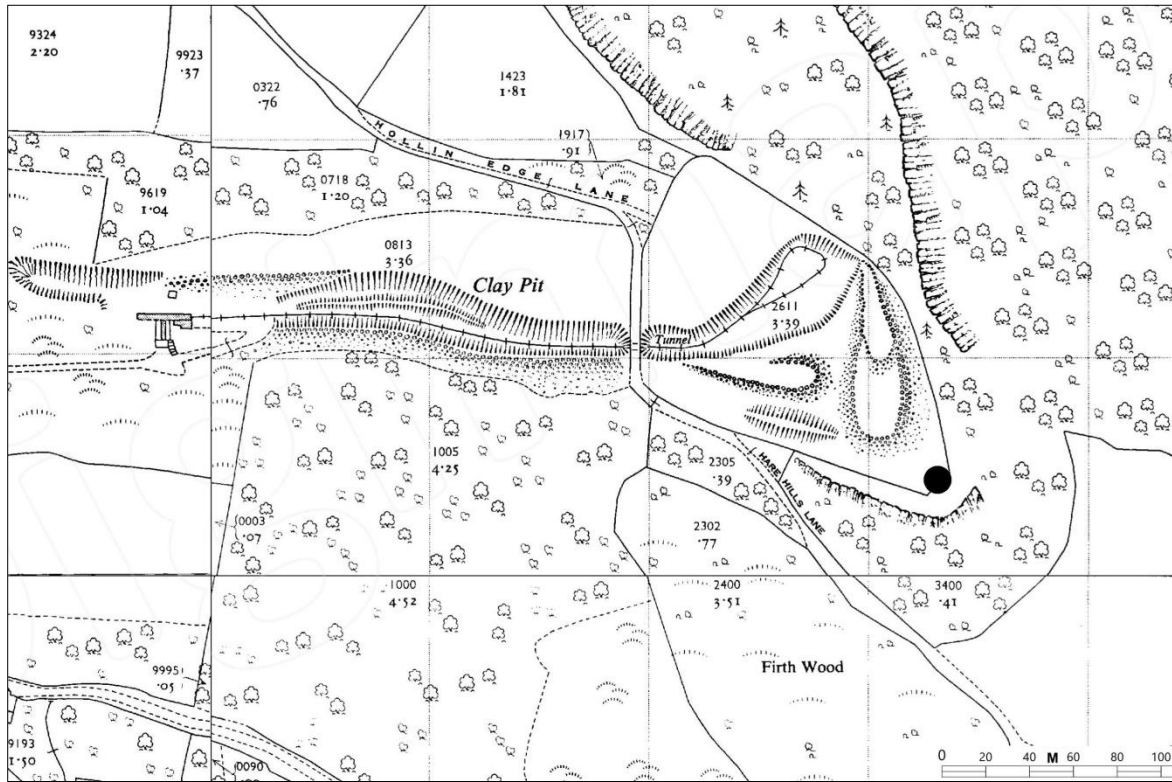
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Appendix

The Red Deer in the area were hunted from Mesolithic period right up to the 18th century with some still roaming the woods in recent times. They were evidently of great significance to the medieval lords according to surviving documents. Little evidence has survived in the Landscape.

1958 Quarry Workings



From Brightomlee. Picture Sheffield



More Hall Estate. Faibanks 1815.

