

The Great North Wood

Illustration by Celyn Brazier



The Great North Wood

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- 2 Nunhead Cemetery
- 3 Buckthorne Cutting Nature Reserve, Devonshire Road Nature Reserve, Garthorne Road Nature Reserve (limited access)
- 4 One Tree Hill
- 5 Dulwich Park
- 6 Horniman Nature Trail
- 7 Sydenham Hill Wood & Cox's Walk
- 8 Dulwich Wood
- 9 West Norwood Cemetery
- 10 Dacres Wood (limited access)
- 11 Unigate Wood
- 12 Hillcrest Estate Wood
- 13 Norwood Park
- 14 Dulwich Upper Wood
- 15 Crystal Palace Park
- 16 Streatham Common
- 17 Norwood Grove
- 18 Biggin Wood
- 19 Convent Wood (closed)
- 20 Upper Norwood Recreation Ground
- 21 Westow Park
- 22 Stambourne Woodland Walk
- 23 Spa Wood
- 24 Beaulieu Heights
- 25 South Norwood Lakes
- 26 Grangewood Park
- 27 South Norwood Country Park
- 28 Long Lane Wood



North



Great North Wood Nature Hunt

There are information boards about the Great North Wood located on 11 sites listed overleaf (all except One Tree Hill).

Each information board has a species to tick off, that can be found in the Great North Wood. Can you find them all?

Tick them off

- English Oak
- Great spotted woodpecker
- English Bluebell
- Purple Hairstreak butterfly
- Grey squirrel
- Stag beetle
- Wood mouse
- Fly agaric mushroom
- Tawny owl
- Wood anemone
- Hornbeam

Key

- Greenspace
- Woodland
- Original Great North Wood area

The first accurate maps of the locality, drawn c1560 - 1600, show the extent of the Wood at this time. This included a mosaic of managed coppices and the wooded commons of Croydon, Norwood, Penge, Lambeth, Westwood and Dulwich.



Topography

The area is hilly, many sites are very steep, and some paths are roughly surfaced.

Toilets

At the time of printing toilets are available at the Horniman Museum & Gardens, Streatham Common and in Crystal Palace Park.

Front cover illustration by Celyn Brazier



1. New Cross Gate Cutting

New Cross Gate Cutting consists of young woodland on the steep slopes of a railway cutting and has been managed by London Wildlife Trust since 1987. It lies within the area of the ancient Hatcham Wood which once formed the northernmost point of the Great North Wood. It contains several wildflower-rich glades and supports over 170 species of flowering plants, including broad-leaved helleborine, a rarity in inner London.



4. One Tree Hill

One Tree Hill was originally the summit of Oak of Honour Wood and was mostly cleared by 1800. Following a riotous campaign to prevent it being converted into a golf course in the 1890s, it was opened as a park in 1905. Management relaxed after the 1960s and woodland has since returned. The site takes its name from the famous tree on its summit, which Queen Elizabeth I is said to have picnicked under.



7. Sydenham Hill Wood & Cox's Walk

Together with Dulwich Wood, Sydenham Hill Wood makes up the largest remaining fragment of the Great North Wood. It has been managed by London Wildlife Trust since 1982, after the successful campaign to save the Wood from development. It is a patchwork of ancient woodland, and younger woodland that has naturally colonised derelict Victorian gardens and an old railway trackbed.



8. Dulwich Wood

Standing in south Dulwich on the western flanks of the Sydenham Hill Ridge, Dulwich Wood comprises 16.4 hectares of mostly oak and hornbeam woodland, owned and managed since 1619 by what is now The Dulwich Estate. Bordering Sydenham Hill Wood together they make up the largest remaining fragment of the Great North Wood.



12. Hillcrest Estate Wood

Hillcrest Estate Wood is a remnant of the Great North Wood once known as Westwood. It now hugs the entrances of two old railway tunnels and is dominated by old oaks and hornbeam along with sweet chestnut and sycamore. Bluebells and wild garlic can be found growing on its steep slopes.



15. Crystal Palace Park

Crystal Palace Park was built on what was once part of Penge Common, a large area of grassland with scattered trees where local people grazed their livestock and collected firewood. The northern part of the common was later turned into the grounds of a stately home called Penge Place. In 1852, it became home to the relocated Crystal Palace and was redesigned as a Victorian pleasure ground. The palace burnt down in 1936 but the park remains. Several patches of oak woodland can be found at the edges of the park and the ornamental lakes are a good place to see Daubenton's bats hunting over the surface of the water at dusk.



16. Streatham Common

Streatham Common is an ancient common that lay at the western boundary of the Great North Wood. It originally consisted of open heathland where local people would gather fuel and graze their cattle. Unlike many other parts of the Great North Wood, it was never 'enclosed' and has been accessible to the public throughout its history. Woodland is a more recent addition to the site and became established towards the end of the 19th century. Part of the common was designated as a Local Nature Reserve in 2013.



18. Biggin Wood

Biggin Wood, once known as Biggin Hill Coppice, later formed part of the grounds of Bigginwood House. By the 1920s the house had fallen into disrepair and the land was purchased by Croydon Corporation in 1939. Biggin Wood consists of a mixture of ancient and recent woodland with oak pollards and coppice stools which show how trees were cut for wood in the past. Some areas of the woodland floor are bare due to trampling but others support wildflowers such as bluebell, wild garlic and wood anemone.



23. Spa Wood

Spa Wood, once known as Bewley Coppice, became the site of the Beulah Spa in 1831, a popular Victorian attraction famed for its mineral spring and pleasure garden. Spa Wood is now a mixture of mainly recent woodland and grassland, with extensive scrubby borders valuable for a range of birds and insects. Oak forms the major part of the tree canopy, along with hornbeam, beech, ash and sycamore, and a vigorous shrub layer of hawthorn and holly provides dense shelter for birds such as blackbird, wren and chiffchaff.



26. Grangewood Park

Grangewood Park was once known as Whitehorse Wood. It was bought by John Davidson Smith in 1806 who later developed it as a private estate. In 1900 it was purchased by Croydon Corporation, opening as a public park in 1901. Grangewood Park supports a dominant canopy of large oaks and there are several areas, particularly around the edges of the park, where a shrub layer is regenerating, and a new generation of oak trees has set seed. A fenced area by the south-eastern edge contains remnant populations of wood anemone and bitter vetch, plants associated with ancient woodland. In autumn, fungi such as boletes and panther caps, thrive.



28. Long Lane Wood

Long Lane Wood is the most southerly survivor of the Great North Wood and is dominated by mature oaks, rough grassland and dense bramble scrub. It supports honeysuckle, wood anemone, pignut, purple hairstreak butterfly and green woodpecker. A closed 'bird sanctuary' forms its eastern flank, containing a shrub layer of hazel, hawthorn, and perhaps the best display of bluebells in the Great North Wood.



24. Beaulieu Heights

Originally part of Windalls Coppice, and later the grounds of two large houses called Hazelwood and Beulieu Lodge, Beaulieu Heights now consists of an intricate mix of ancient and recent woodland, rough grassy fields and grand solitary oaks. The older parts of the woodland contain relict hazel coppice, and support ancient woodland indicator species, bluebell and wood anemone.

History of The Great North Wood.

For centuries the Great North Wood stretched, more or less unbroken, from Deptford in the north to Selhurst in the south and at its widest point spanned from Streatham in the west to what we now know as Norwood Junction in the east. The area has been known as Norwood or North Wood since at least the 16th century, a name that is thought to distinguish it from the Weald that lies to the south of Croydon. Great North Wood is a more recent name first appearing in J. Corbet Anderson's book about the area published in 1898.

By the 16th Century the Great North Wood was a working woodland, at the centre of a bustling woodland economy that provided vital resources for London and Croydon including coppice products for charcoal-burning, firewood and tools; timber for the construction of ships and buildings; and oak bark for the leather making industry in Bermondsey. It also served as grazing land.

The flourishing woodland economy of the Great North Wood began to break down in the 18th century as a result of the technological changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. By the 19th century, steel replaced timber, coal replaced charcoal, and industrial chemicals replaced oak bark in the tanning industry which meant that the economic value of the Great North Wood quickly collapsed. In the 18th and 19th centuries, a series of Inclosure Acts resulted in woodland being parcelled-up and sold-off and many of the ancient coppices were cleared for agriculture or pasture.

The relocation of the Crystal Palace to Penge Place (formerly enclosed from Penge Common) in 1854, resulted in new development on the remaining woodlands on the ridge's steeper slopes and high plateau which until then were protected by their topography and the London clay on which they stood. By the 1890s much of the Great North Wood had been lost.

Today the Great North Wood consists of several ancient woodland fragments, including Dulwich Wood, Sydenham Hill Wood and Biggin Wood, as well as recent woodland that has developed on cleared land such as on One Tree Hill and New Cross Gate Cutting. The woodland habitat of the Great North Wood stands within a wider network of greenspaces including allotments, cemeteries, gardens, parks, open spaces, and playing fields.

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