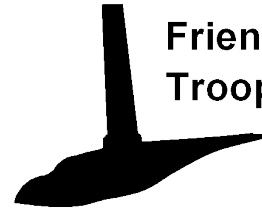


Blackswarth Road Wood

Friends of
Troopers Hill



West of Troopers Hill Woods or Crews Hole Woodland is another woodland, historically known as Blackswarth Road Wood, that many people know nothing about.

Blackswarth Road Wood is much smaller and is not open to the public, but is crucial wildlife habitat for deer, badgers, and a plethora of bats and birds.

The Wood, which lies to the south of Avon View Cemetery, is part of an important wildlife corridor along the Avon Valley bringing wildlife into the centre of the City. It is also important for its appearance on the steep sides of the Avon Valley.

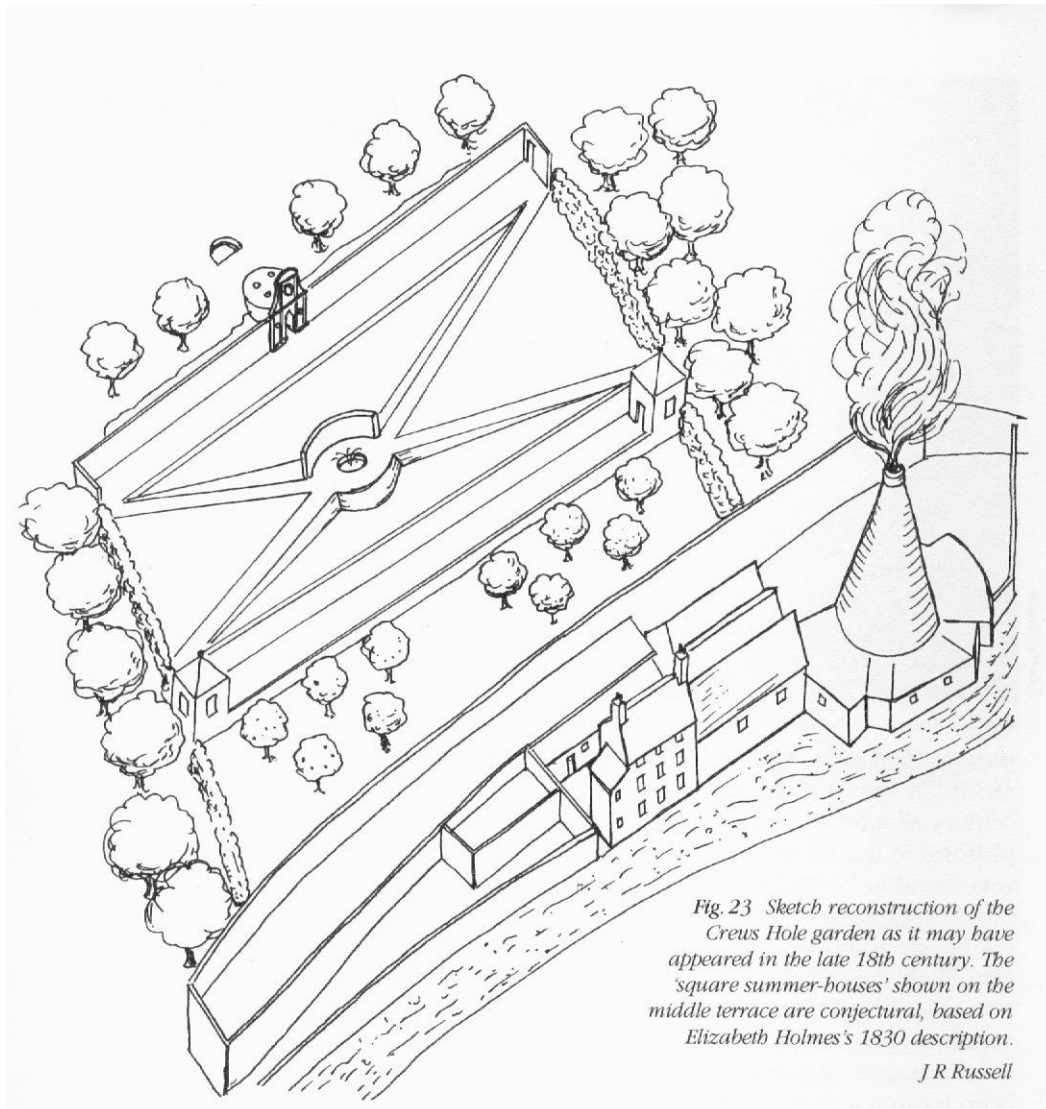


Manor of Blackswarth

We believe that Blackswarth Road Wood was part of the Manor of Blackswarth, which would seem to have been of at least medieval origin. The manor was handed to St. Augustine's Abbey in 1153.

In 1539 the abbey was dissolved by King Henry VIII in the Dissolution of the Monasteries and became the seat of the newly created Bishop of Bristol and the cathedral of the new Diocese of Bristol. The church therefore became owners of the land that had belonged to the Manor of Blackswarth. The 'Ecclesiastical Commissioners' did not sell Blackswarth Road Wood until 1913 and they still hold rights to mine under the land.

Blackswarth Road Wood in the Eighteenth Century



In the mid 1700s the eastern part of the current Wood became a formal terraced garden leading up to a grotto-like bathhouse (now [Grade 2 listed](#)). The garden was laid out in the mid-eighteenth century; some of the retaining walls still exist and the lines of the paths can still be seen.

The garden belonged to a house attached to a glass bottle manufactory and furnace which was at the south-east corner of the wood.

The sketch above shows how it might have looked.

It was probably constructed by William King, the proprietor of the glassworks from 1752 until his death in 1777. His house was attached to the works, and the garden was behind it. The Bathhouse would have had white render on the front with black blocks as features. These blocks were cast from slag, the waste product of the nearby copper smelting works. Similar blocks were used at the Black Castle in Brislington.

After King's death the glassworks became disused and his house and garden were let to a local family. A local writer, [Elizabeth Holmes](#) (neé Emra), described the house and the overgrown gardens in her collection of essays 'Scenes in our Parish'

published in 1830.



The Bathhouse today

In the chapter entitled 'The Strawberry Feast' Elizabeth looks back at her childhood and says,

"once in every summer, we would make an excursion to the cottage of an old woman, to drink tea and to enjoy the particularly fine fruit, with which her hilly and sunny garden would supply us."

"On the preceding evening, how anxiously we watched the sunset, and foretold fine weather, however it threatened rain, - or feared rain, however glowing and glorious the setting sun might be."

"it was not till old Betty became too infirm to receive us, and the meeting was adjourned to the house below the hanging gardens, beside the river, that we found out all the pleasures of that evening. We could not ride there to be sure, but you know how lovely the walk is, down the fields on a summer's evening and through that deep and stony lane."

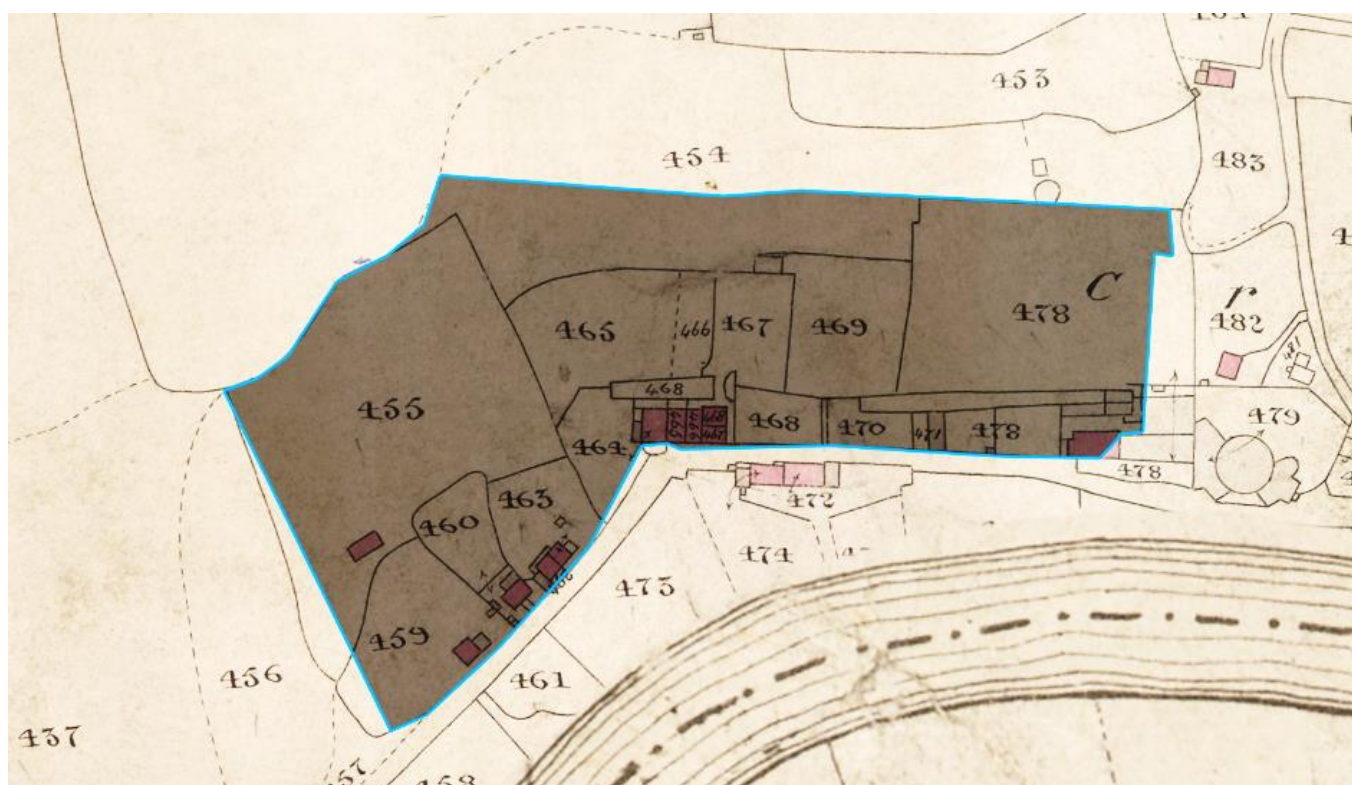
"The scene of our festivities was a large lofty room in an awkwardly built house, designed originally for the agent of a certain concern which failed as many other concerns have done; so that for years the extensive works connected with it have lain void..."

"the great house was let to a poor but very respectable family, who thankfully allowed the use of their large room on these occasions. It was a curious old place altogether; but its chief charm was the garden, built according to the taste of the times sixty years ago. Perhaps I should have said laid out, but there were so many flights of stone steps leading through brick arches, to broad straight walks one above another; and so many square summer-houses with stonewalls and square doors and windows, that your first thought was of the buildings; and stiff and formal enough it must have looked when it was first planned. But now that the brick arches were falling into decay, and ornamented with faithful wall-flower, and wreathed and half covered with ivy; ... it had become interesting from its appearance of antiquity."

“For when we reached the top of the last flight of tottering steps, we found ourselves in a wilderness, where, up the steep side of the hill, grew untrimmed bushes of red a white roses, tangled with wild bramble, and over topped by stately old pear trees.”

“many a frock was torn, and many a tumble we met with, before we reached the arched summer house, with the bath in the middle, at the very top of the hill. And oh! what a view we had then. The steep and singular garden up which we had just climbed; the old buildings and tall chimneys clustered together so very far below us; the barren and quarried hill, with its yellow spots of gorse and broom, and its purple shade of heath, raising itself above the dark heaps of dross on our own side; and then the river, the beautiful, soft flowing river that we have all loved so well, laving as kindly our rough and barren banks, and holding its pure mirror to us, as truly as to the embellished and fertile scenery on the other side; and how clearly we saw every reversed image of the trees in the little copse-wood beyond...”

Blackswarth Road Wood in the 1840s



The above shows the outline of Blackswarth Road Wood on the ‘Tithe map’ from the 1840s. Tithe was a tax based on land ownership. There was a survey in the 1840s to establish who owned what. The Tithe map has plot numbers. There is a separate document with a description of each plot, who owned it and who occupied it.

Plot 478 was the house and formal garden described above. As can clearly be seen from its shape plot 479 is the glasshouse.

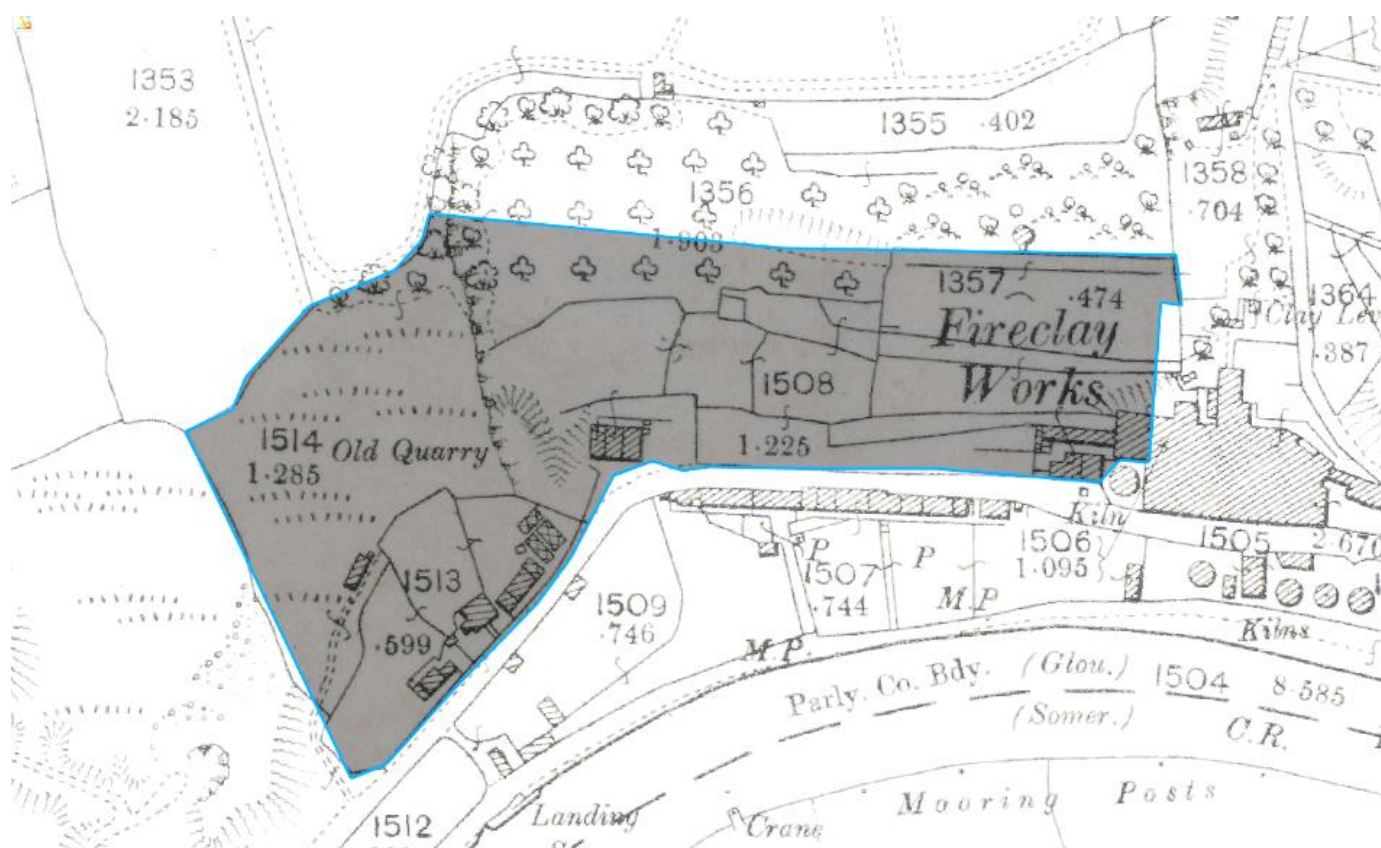
Plot 454, which includes what is now the northern part of the Wood, together with plot 453 are described as ‘Part of the Forest’. These two plots were owned by John Sealy who also owned much of what is now the cemetery and the land around what is now Beaufort Road. Plot 455 owned by Thomas Jones is described as ‘void’ but the

remainder of the site of the Wood, as well as the glasshouse and garden, was recorded as being owned jointly by Joseph Cookson and John Pountney; it was held on lease, the true owners remained the Ecclesiastical Commissioners on behalf of the church. John Pountney was almost certainly John Decimus Pountney, who owned a major Bristol pottery company and probably used the kiln at the old glassworks; he was Mayor of Bristol from 1847–1848.

There were a series of cottages along the road. Opposite between Crews Hole Road and the river was the [Beehive Beer Shop](#), also owned by Joseph Cookson and John Pountney.

The land to the west of the Wood, where Riversway Nursing Home now stands (plot 437), was a quarry operated by Joseph Monks. The quarry was recorded as owned by Philip George (again as a leaseholder). Mr George also owned the nearby [Blackswarth Leadworks](#) and his perhaps best known in Bristol for George's Brewery.

Blackswarth Road Wood in the Late 1800s / Early 1900s



By the late 1800s, the glass works site had been taken over by the Bristol Fireclay Company. The cone of the old glass works had been demolished and the map shows a new smaller furnace at the western edge of their site. What was the house became offices.

The fireclay mines were accessed by tunnels (levels) running into the hillside. One was north of the fireclay works, the other was south of Crews Hole Road. These led into the mines which were under the cemetery.

The site area at the west of the Wood, is now shown on the maps as an ‘old quarry’ this was most probably an extension of the quarry that occupied what is now the nursing home site.

Cottages shown on the Tithe map are still between the road and the quarry, these are shown in [a Loxton Drawing](#). It is also notable that Beehive Terrace on the other side of Crews Hole Road has been extended.

The Bristol Fireclay Works operated until 1912, they also had another works with mines under Troopers Hill.

In 1913 the land that is now the Wood (and other land) was sold by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to William Butler and Company (Bristol) Limited. Their works were below Troopers Hill, it is not clear why they purchased it. The land that is now Riversway Nursing Home remained in the ownership of the leadworks company until at least 1949, by then this was Sheldon Bush and Patent Shot Company Limited.

A [1936 aerial photograph](#) shows that the lower part of the Wood and the formal garden is in use as either gardens or allotments. Higher up the slopes below the cemetery there are tree and scrub.

Blackswarth Road Wood in the Late 20th Century

By the late 1950s the area of the Wood as well as what is now Riversway Nursing Home both came into the ownership of St Anne’s Board Mills Co Ltd who owned an extensive works on the other side of the River Avon, mostly making cardboard for cigarette packets for Imperial Tobacco.

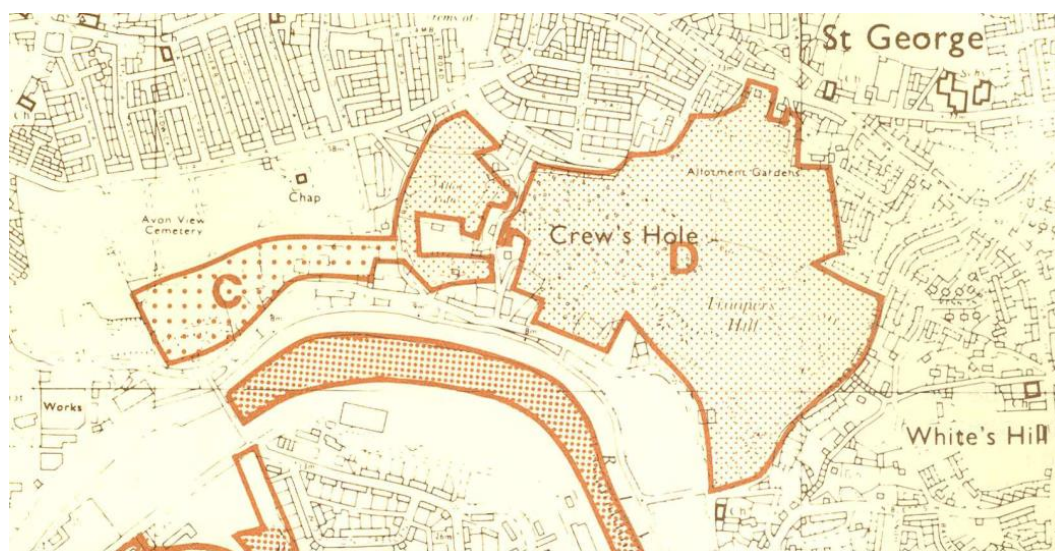


St Anne's Board Mills on 4th Sept 1977 (photo by Mike Beale)

On the photograph of the Board Mills above, behind the cloud of steam and in front of the tower blocks of Barton Hill you can just make out some white fuel tanks on the Crew's Hole side of the river.

These fuel tanks were installed in the late 1950s to provide an emergency fuel oil supply to the Board Mills, they were sited where Riversway Nursing Home now stands. The footbridge that was installed in 1957 to replace the old ferry carried the pipes from the tanks to the works. The area of the formal garden continued to be used as allotments under the ownership of the Board Mills.

Following the closure of St Annes Board Mills in the 1980s various plans were made to regenerate the Avon Valley & surrounding area - including a Bristol City Council [Development Brief and Conservation Policy](#) adopted in 1983.



By this time the Board Mills site, Blackswarth Road Wood and the site of the tanks was in the ownership of Imperial Group; the Development Brief proposed that both should be dedicated as open space (zone C). Troopers Hill (zone D) was existing open space to be improved.

The site was described as ‘abandoned allotments and regenerating scrub and woodland’. It added:

“This area could become attractive to large numbers of visitors. It is essential that sufficient well-screened and heavily landscaped parking areas be provided in anticipation of this. If they are removed, the site of the former fuel oil tanks could well be used for car parking, perhaps in association with a picnic area.”

The oil tanks were removed, but nothing came of these plans and the Woods continued to regenerate. In 1989 the Bristol Development Corporation (BDC) was formed by the Government to regenerate the area; it also became the Planning Authority.

The BDC plans retained the intention to keep the woodlands as open space, however, in 1995 it was the whole plot sold to Riversway Care Ltd, so that the nursing home could be built on the area of the oil tanks. Riversway Nursing Home opened in 1997.

Despite there being a requirement in the sale that Blackswarth Road Wood be kept as open space; on Friday 15th December 1995 the BDC awarded planning permission for a community care facility with 10 dwellings to be constructed in the lower part of the Wood. This was the last working day that the BDC acted as planning authority, these powers reverted to Bristol City Council on 18th December 1995.

Fortunately, this planning permission was not acted on and lapsed. A further application for housing was rejected by Bristol City Council in 2001.

The 2001 application was refused because it was contrary to policies in the 1997 Bristol Local Plan regarding ecology, highway safety and other matters.

Subsequent versions of the Bristol Local Plan maintained the protection of the site, in the current Plan, formally adopted 2014, the site is a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) and an Important Open Space. It is also within the Avon Valley Conservation Area.

Plans mentioned in the 1983 Development Brief to widen Crews Hole Road have never been enacted and are unlikely ever to be, so the difficulties of making a safe access to the site for vehicles remain as a further barrier to any development.

In 2008 Blackswarth Road Wood was transferred from Riversway Care Ltd to GKG Land Limited. Notwithstanding the planning constraints, GKG sought pre-application advice from BCC in 2014 for a similar development to that refused in 2001.

The response to this ‘pre-app’ made it clear that any planning application would be refused and as a result no application was submitted.

As a community group Friends of Troopers Hill were consulted, they objected to the proposal but added:

“our group would be very interested in establishing contact with the landowners about the future management of the land. The land is an important factor in the ecology of the Avon wildlife corridor and also contains the remnants of an 18th century formal garden.”

No further discussions took place.

While the various plans described above were discussed, nothing was done on the land. Since it ceased to be used as allotments in the early 1980s Blackswarth Road Wood has remained largely undisturbed and the trees have matured.

In 2023 the owners announced that the land would be put up for sale by auction and the charity Protect Earth launched a [Crowdfunder to buy the Wood](#).

We hope that this is successful and that Blackswarth Road Wood will remain a haven for wildlife for future generations.

*Friends of Troopers Hill
August 2023*