

How old is Farnhill Wood ?

No, seriously, it's a genuine question. I don't know; even though I've lived near the wood for almost 25 years.

This article describes the various approaches I've used to try and answer the question, although I can't say that I've come up with anything like a definitive answer. At the end, I've tried to pull the various strands of evidence together and provide an admittedly conjectural history of the wood.

Evidence from flora

Farnhill Wood is largely made up of native deciduous trees. There are some evergreens, mostly holly bushes, but for the most part it is a mixture of beech, oak, silver birch and some sycamore.

So, to try and get a first guess at the age of the wood, we might ask how old is the oldest of the trees we see today ?

Oak trees

Of the trees listed above, oak are the longest lived: with some UK specimens known to be at least 800+ years old¹⁻³. Furthermore, it's fairly easy to get an estimate of the age of an oak tree by measuring its trunk⁴.

Early in 2012 I took measurements of eight oak trees, chosen at random throughout the wood, but excluding any with a diameter of less than 180cm. Of these, the largest had a diameter of 240cm (giving an age of about 100 years old), and the smallest 190cm (about 77 years old); all the rest were of almost uniform size – with a width of 235 ±2cm (about 95 years old).

Now this cannot reflect the true age of the wood (see the rest of this article) but it can be explained if all the mature oak trees were removed from the wood around 100 years ago. This ties-in with the start of WWI and it is known, from other woods, that a large number of oak trees were cut down for use in the war-effort^{5,6}.

Beech trees

Beech trees are not generally as long-lived as oaks, but can reach 300 years old⁷.

Simple observation shows that many of the beech trees in Farnhill Wood are fully mature: perhaps 250 years old ? What's also interesting is that many of these trees seem to be the same approximate size and age, and also seem to have been planted to a defined pattern.



Fig 1: A Google Maps satellite image of the northern section of Farnhill Wood (~2009)

Figure 1 shows a satellite image of the northern section of Farnhill Wood. Notice the double-row of mature beech trees along the northern edge of the wood; and the single row of beech trees, planted at regular (approx 25 feet) intervals, along Bradley Lane.

If the beech trees along the edges of the wood were planted in a deliberate pattern 250 years ago, does this mean that Farnhill Wood is 250 years old ?

Ancient woodland indicator plants

The author is not a sufficiently good enough naturalist to identify many Ancient Woodland Vascular Plants (AWVPs) – indicators of ancient woodland¹³ – within Farnhill Wood. However, the following species are certainly present:

- Wild garlic (Ramsons) – *Allium ursinum*
- Wood sorrel – *Oxalis acetosella*
- Beech fern – *Phegopteris connectilis*
- Holly – *Ilex aquifolium*
- Bluebell – *Hyacinthoides non-Scripta*
- Betony – *Stachys officinalis*
- Hart’s tongue – *Phyllitis scolopendrium*

In addition, wild bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) is widespread on that part of Farnhill Moor adjacent to the wood.

The presence of these native British species are strongly indicative of ancient woodland⁸; that is, woods that date from before 1600⁹.

Evidence from maps

The local history group is not aware of any maps of the area made before Farnhill Wood existed. However, old maps do provide interesting information about the wood.

Notes for Warburton's 1720 map

In 1720, John Warburton produced one of the earliest maps of Yorkshire¹⁰. The map itself doesn't give sufficient detail, but the notes Warburton made prior to producing the map are rather interesting¹¹. The route between Farnhill and Hamblethorpe Farm on Bradley Lane is described like this:

Farnell village – away ye Left to Farnell Hall ½ furlong ye Left – Farnell Wood and a wall ye Left – ye Common ye Right – Royd's House over ye River S.W. 77 about 7 furlongs – Cononley Hall and village S.W. 80 about 6 furlongs – ye end of Farnell Wood – ye River 4 furlongs ye Left, very crooked – a house ye Left ("Hamblethorpe")

There are some points to note here:

- The priority for traffic has changed over the years; today Farnhill Main Street continues straight on to Farnhill Hall; these notes suggest that in 1720 the road swung round and into Bradley Lane, a left turn had to be made to get from Main Street to Farnhill Hall.
- Farnhill Wood is named and therefore must have existed.
- The wall along Bradley Lane, that forms the eastern boundary of the wood, was a notable landmark.
- No other walls are described – although this alone does not mean that others didn't exist.

1768 Farnhill Parish Map

The 1768 Farnhill Parish Map (Figure 2) supports the existence of a fully mature Farnhill Wood by this date.



Fig 2: Part of the 1768 Kildwick Parish map, with Farnhill Wood circled (reproduced by permission of Christ Church, Oxford)

1838 Farnhill township map

The earliest known detailed map of Farnhill is the 1838 Township map. This shows field and parish boundaries as well as major areas and buildings.

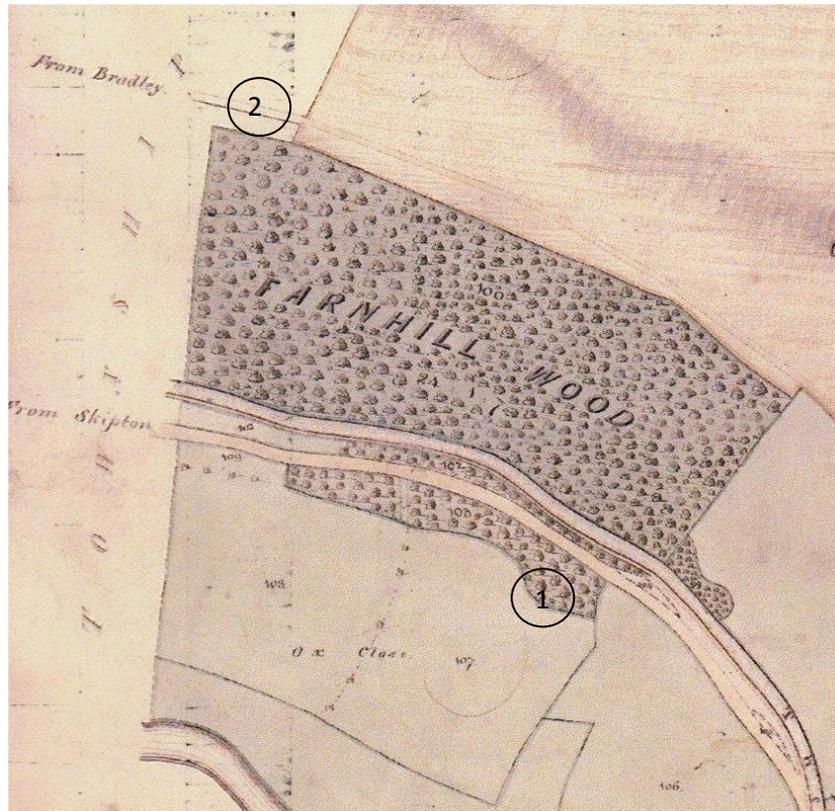


Fig 3: Part of the 1838 Farnhill Township map showing Farnhill Wood

The section of the map shown in Figure 3 has two interesting features:

1. Whereas today the Western edge of the wood follows the line of the Leeds-Liverpool canal, in 1838 the wood extended beyond both the canal and the Skipton-Keighley road. This strongly suggests that the wood was present when both the canal (1773)¹² and turnpike road (1786)¹¹ were built. It seems likely that the wood may have occupied the field to the West of the canal (labelled as Ox Close on the map), as a boundary bank and hedge can still be seen²³.
2. The boundary between Kildwick and Bradley parishes is shown on the left side of the map. Notice how the parish boundary comes down off the moor, crosses Bradley Lane, and then – rather than continuing in a straight line – turns to the North for a short distance before continuing West. This dog-leg puts the whole of the wood into Farnhill. The fact that this section of parish boundary is almost a straight line has been taken as suggesting this boundary is an artificial one: possibly the result of an agreement between the adjacent medieval manors of Hamblethorpe and Farnhill²³. (Hamblethorpe was one of the three manors of Bradley, mentioned in the Domesday book. It is now represented solely by Hamblethorpe Farm.)

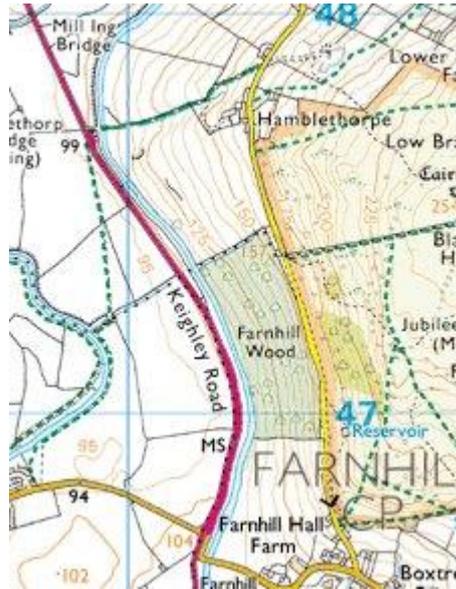


Fig 4: Modern OS map, showing the parish boundary following the line of Farnhill Wood

Evidence from walls

Farnhill Wood has three boundary walls, with the Western edge being formed by the Leeds-Liverpool canal.

Dating dry-stone walls is not easy, but there have been two major historical periods during which the majority of the currently surviving dry-stone walls were built. Walls built in each of these two periods have quite characteristic features, and so it is quite possible to assign a given wall to one or other period.

Medieval period – the Eastern boundary wall

Walls were built in the medieval period and earlier to demark large land areas such as monastic land-holdings and manorial estates. Such walls, dating to earlier than 1350, can be identified by the presence of exceptionally large stones (referred to as “orthostats”) laid on their ends forming the base. Examples of such walls are recorded at Hebden in Upper Wharfedale¹⁴, Lower Winskill in Ribblesdale¹⁵ and at Bordley township¹⁶. Orthostat walls are made of clearance stones, rather than quarried stone²³.

The Eastern boundary wall of Farnhill Wood, which runs parallel to Bradley Lane, appears to contain orthostats in several places, particularly at the Southern (Farnhill) end (Figure 5).



Fig 5: Modern OS map, highlighting the section of the Eastern wall that contains orthostats

Examples are shown in Figures 6 and 7.





Fig 6: This and the previous photograph overlap to show a section of the Eastern wall, photographed from Bradley Lane, with an almost continuous stretch of orthostats at the base.



Fig 7: Another section of the Eastern wall, photographed from Bradley Lane. Again showing orthostats at the base.

So, does this mean that the Farnhill end of the Eastern boundary wall is medieval ?

In fact, close inspection suggests that the whole wall originally had orthostats and may be of medieval origin.

Almost inevitably the wall has been rebuilt or partially rebuilt along its entire length. However, at the Southern (Farnhill) end the rebuild has retained the orthostat base, whereas the Northern (Bradley) end of the wall has been demolished right down to ground level and rebuilt on a slightly different line.

So, although there are very few orthostats visible in the Northern section of the wall (Figure 8) when it is viewed from the lane, when the wall is examined from within the wood the continued presence of orthostats is clear.



Fig 8: Modern OS map, highlighting the section of the Eastern wall that has evidence of “orthostat rubble”

The orthostats, which would have been included within the medieval wall, have been used to:

- Form a flat platform on which the wall can be rebuilt
- Provide buttressing for the rebuild, particularly in those section where the ground level slopes down the hill away from the wall.

As shown in Figures 9 and 10.



Fig 9: Part of the far Northern (Bradley) end of the Eastern wall, photographed from within the wood. Here orthostat rubble has been used to provide a solid platform for the later rebuild. The mature beech tree (250+ years old) growing through the rubble suggests that this section of the wall was rebuilt before 1750.



Fig 10: Part of the far Northern (Bradley) end of the Eastern wall, photographed from within the wood. Orthostats from the original medieval wall have been used as buttressing for the later rebuild.

Another interesting feature is that the “flat platform” that I have suggested is the result of the demolition of the original medieval wall doesn’t end at the North-East corner of the wood. Instead it continues North for a further 10 metres or so, into the field. Could this indicate that the original medieval wall extended a little further North than the currently visible rebuild ?

Enclosure period – the North and South boundary walls

The second major period of dry-stone wall building was in the 18th century, in the period of field enclosures and the move from an open field system of farming^{17,18}. Acts of parliament for the enclosure of fields in Kildwick were passed in 1773¹⁹ and for Bradley in 1791²⁰.

Enclosure walls can be distinguished from walls of earlier periods by²¹:

- The use of more regular courses of stonework.
- The absence of significant numbers of orthostats.
- The use of “throughs”. These are large flat stones, laid at regular intervals along the length of a wall, well above ground-level, which protrude through the full width of the wall – providing stability to the structure.

The walls that form the Northern (Bradley) and Southern (Farnhill) boundaries of Farnhill Wood are clearly from this period (see Figures 12 and 13).



Fig 11: Modern OS map, highlighting the Northern and Southern enclosure walls



Fig 12: Part of the Northern (Bradley) boundary wall, photographed from within the wood.
No orthostats are present and a single regular line of throughs has been used.



Fig 13: Another section of the Northern (Bradley) boundary wall, photographed from within the wood.
Here the wall, descending a steep slope has two sets of throughs.

Where the medieval and enclosure period walls meet – the North-east corner

So, I am suggesting three distinct phases of wall building around Farnhill Wood:

- A medieval Eastern boundary, containing orthostats and running parallel to the current Bradley Lane; this may have continued a little further Northward than the current wall.
- A substantial section of the Eastern boundary, towards the Northern (Bradley) end, rebuilt on a slightly different line, so that the orthostats of the medieval wall are no longer visible from Bradley Lane.
- Two later enclosure walls, forming the Northern (Bradley) and Southern (Farnhill) boundaries.

But, can you see the join between the medieval and enclosure period walls ? Is there a change in the pattern of building where the walls meet ?

The answer is, possibly (Figure 14). It seems to me as if the orthostat rubble from the medieval wall forms the base for the very end of the Bradley boundary as it runs away down the slope.



Fig 14: Photograph of the Northern (Bradley) enclosure boundary wall at the point where it meets the Eastern medieval wall. Notice the distinct change in construction pattern (white line), with a two or three possible orthostats used here although they are largely absent from the rest of this wall.

Conclusions – a conjectural history of Farnhill Wood

So, what does this all mean ? What follows is my attempt to draw the various lines of evidence together and provide a history of Farnhill Wood. However, it is important to understand that a lot of this is conjectural.

- Farnhill Wood is very old – but just how old it's not possible to say with any certainty. It is has many of the species indicative of an ancient woodland (pre-1600), but this is an artificial cut-off date and the wood could be considerably older²².
- The wood was originally larger than the one we see today. It may have extended further Northward, towards Bradley; and certainly extended further Westward, towards the river.
- In the medieval period, the wood was part of the demesne land of Farnhill Hall.
- At some time prior to 1350, the Eastern boundary of the wood was defined by a wall. Why was this wall built ?

It has been suggested that a hollow-way, was being used to move livestock between Farnhill and Hamblethorpe²³. The Farnhill end of this hollow-way can be clearly seen (Figure 15).



Fig 15: The start of the hollow-way between Farnhill and Hamblethorpe, the route subsequently blocked by the enclosure wall built to define the Southern edge of the wood.

Photograph taken from Bradley Lane, looking North.

The hollow-way ran roughly parallel to the current Bradley Lane, in the gap between the wall and the modern road; as shown on the 1838 township map (Figure 16).

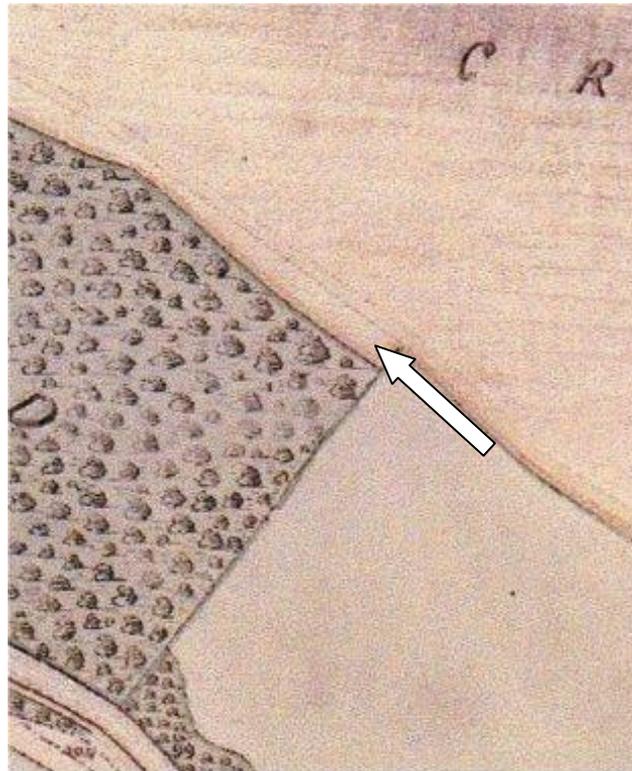


Fig 16: Part of the 1838 Farnhill township map. The ancient hollow-way between Farnhill and Hamblethorpe ran between the edge of the wood and the lane (arrowed).

Could it have been that the medieval Eastern wall was built to prevent livestock wandering off the hollow-way and into the wood? Walls at the Northern and Southern ends would not have been necessary at this stage as, unlike today, the open medieval fields of Farnhill and Hamblethorpe would not have been used for grazing of untethered animals.

- In 1720, John Warburton noted the Eastern wall when researching his map. The 1768 Kildwick Parish map confirms the existence of a fully developed woodland.
- In 1773, the new Leeds-Liverpool canal cut through the Western edge of the wood, as did the turnpike road in 1786.
- Also around this time, enclosure walls were built – defining the Northern and Southern boundaries of the wood.
- The woodland West of the turnpike was gradually removed, very little remains on a map of 1909, and eventually we reach the point we have today where the canal forms the Western boundary.

Acknowledgement

Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group would like to acknowledge the help and assistance of Alison Armstrong in putting together this article. In particular, for her interesting discussions with the author on the hollow-way running between Farnhill and Hamblethorpe and suggestions on how to date dry stone walls.

The 1768 Kildwick Parish map was reproduced by permission of Christ Church, Oxford.

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