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CHOPWELL WOODS 2ND JUNE 2023

The group met at the car park within Forestry England's on a bright, sunny morning with a slight chill to the air. Although Chopwell Woods is a spider's web of intersecting paths, cycle tracks and bridle paths, there doesn't seem to be much visual history visible. Whilst waiting for any last-minute amblers to turn up, the opportunity was taken to have a quick review of the site's unseen history.

One of the earliest known Saxon settlers in the valley is thought to have been named Ceoppa who built himself a farmstead and well in the clearing of the north bank of the river. He died in 685 AD and was buried in a site now occupied by a Heavy Gate Farm in the village which now bears his name.

The first written record belongs to the Middle Ages when the land was part of the estates of the Prince Bishop of Durham. In 1150 Bishop Pudsey granted the Manor of Chopwell to the first Abbot of Newminster in exchange for the Manor of Washington. Newminster Abbey retained possession of the Manor until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536.

In 1634, oak trees from Chopwell Wood were used in the build of a warship called 'Sovereign of The Seas' or 'The Royal Sovereign' under instructions from Charles 1. It was the first three-decked warship to be built, and was 232 feet long and 48 feet wide. The estimated cost was £13,680.00, but as seems still to be the problem, costs over run and the final cost was £40,833 8s 1½d!

Chopwell Colliery saw its first pit shaft sunk as far back as 1781 and remained until its closure on 25 November 1966. There were up to six individual pits within the colliery. The colliery was bought by the Consett Iron Company in 1896, before being handed over to the National Coal Board in 1947, when the British coal industry was nationalised. The colliery's highest employment numbers were in 1921, when 2,185 people worked there.

The Chopwell and Garesfield Railway operated from 1896 to 1961. The standard gauge railway was built by the Consett Iron Company to carry coal from their colliery at Chopwell. The Railway connected Chopwell and High Spenn along a line through Chopwell Wood. The remaining track bed of the line is now called the Old Colliery Railway Footpath. Work began on the railway in 1893. At first it was used to transport bricks, made by the Bute Brickworks at High Spenn, to Chopwell to build the colliery buildings. Once the colliery was opened the railway was transporting about 3,000 tons of coal a day. The line joined an existing railway at High Spenn, which carried the coal to the coal staithes at Derwenthaugh (located behind the Skiff Inn) on the River Tyne, where it was loaded onto colliers for onward transport. The closure of the colliery meant that the economic reason for the existence of Chopwell village had gone. In the development plan of 1964, Chopwell was categorised as a type "D" village. Chopwell was to be allowed to decline. The category D was removed in 1972, shortly before Chopwell became part of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council.

The amble concluded at the Beat n' Track café for the partaking of sustenance, which how all good ambles end!

