

## Chapter 3

# Barnsdale

### Sue Howlett

For modern visitors to Rutland, the name of Barnsdale provides a regular source of confusion. Tourist information draws their attention to the horticultural pleasures of Barnsdale Gardens, or to the events, meals or accommodation offered by Barnsdale Lodge Hotel and Barnsdale Hall Hotel. They may follow signs to the impressively landscaped Barnsdale car park on the shores of Rutland Water. From here, on a May evening, they may wander delightedly along the bluebell-lined path through Barnsdale Wood.

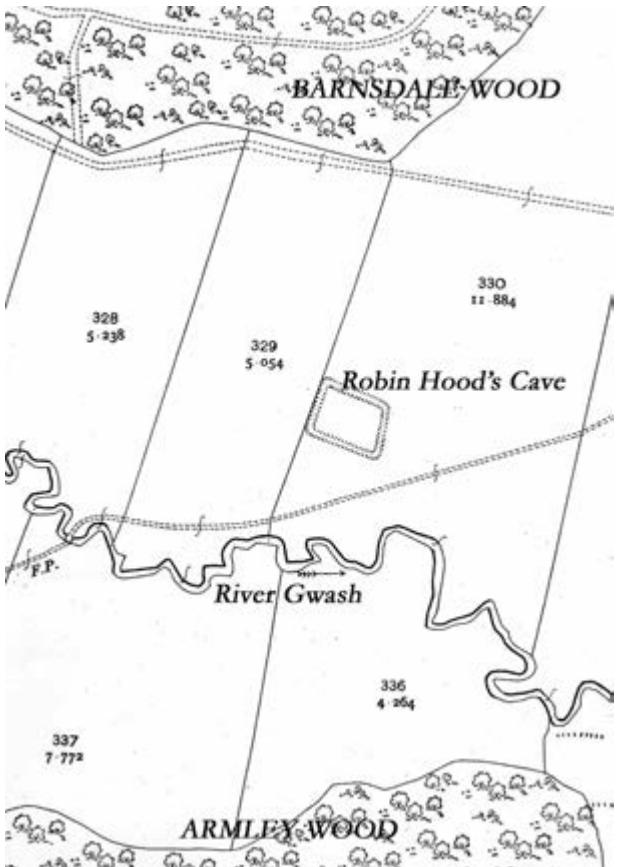
And yet, Rutland has no village or parish of Barnsdale. An early form of the name appears in 1283, when Bernard de Brus of Exton made a generous donation to the monks and church of St Andrew, Northampton. This included the income from the church of Exton ‘and all the Tithes of Hay, which in his Park of Bernardyshill, or elsewhere they have been accustomed to receive’ (Wright 1684, 53). According to the *VCH* (II, 10) ‘Bernardshill’ is mentioned as early as 1207. It is ‘Bernardshul’ in 1329 and ‘Bernardeshilpark’ in 1421.

These references confirm that Bernard’s Hill, or Barnsdale, was a park, created for hunting, in the parish of Exton near its border with the parish of Whitwell. An area of woodland would be enclosed by earth banks and wooden palings not only to keep the deer in but also to provide cover for them. They would be hunted by the lord of the manor, providing valuable venison as well as sport. There were ten such parks in medieval Rutland, many of which were marked on various early county maps. In 1579, Christopher Saxton produced the first printed Atlas of the English and Welsh counties. His map of Rutland shows the encircling palings of ‘barnesdale[ar]k’. Thirty years later, John Speed’s map of 1610 also shows the enclosed park at ‘Barinsdale’.



*From Speed's  
map of 1610  
showing the  
enclosed park  
at Barnsdale*

The boundaries of Barnsdale Park probably reached from ‘Barnsdale Wood in the north to Armley Wood in the south . . . with a laund [grassy glade] between them. The park was typically elliptical in shape, and remained largely unaltered until recent replanting and the creation of Rutland Water’ (Cantor 1980, 15-18). This area was investigated by R F Hartley for his 1983 publication, *The Medieval Earthworks of Rutland*. He notes that the open area between the two woods contained a small moated site known as ‘Robin Hood’s Cave’, which he suggests might have surrounded a lodge for the keeper of the park. This feature was destroyed, along with much of Barnsdale and Armley Woods, in the creation of Rutland Water.



*Right: Looking north-west across the north arm of the Gwash valley towards Barnsdale Hill and Barnsdale Hall before this area was flooded to create Rutland Water (Joan Wild)*

Barnsdale was maintained as a deer park by its various owners between 1206 and 1602 (Cantor 1980, 17). Twenty years later, Barnsdale and Exton came into the possession of Sir Edward Noel, 2nd Viscount Campden. When the countryside became more settled after the upheavals of civil war, the Noels, soon to become Earls of Gainsborough, set about enlarging and improving their greater park at Exton. It was transformed by laying out geometric areas of woodland divided by avenues, formal gardens close to the house and a lake, all enclosed by a hedge or fence (Cantor 1994, 158-61). Meanwhile Barnsdale Wood, having no resident owner, lost its importance as a deer park.

*Left: The earthwork remains of 'Robin Hood's Cave', near the north arm of the River Gwash, highlighted on the OS 2nd ed 25" map 1904*



As an area of ancient woodland surviving into the twentieth century, Barnsdale Wood was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, although sadly part of it had to be lost with the creation of the new reservoir. Trees were felled where required, their stumps providing forlorn testimony to their loss when the water level falls in dry weather.

In the winter of 1997, Clive and Elaine Jones carried out a survey of the boundaries of Barnsdale Wood, especially along the Rutland Water shoreline, as well as the state of the woodland and its rides. They found many rides overgrown and woodland neglected. However, evidence was found of a possibly medieval external ditch and internal earthen bank along the west side of the wood, parallel with the old Stamford Road which now leads down into the water at Barnsdale. There may have been a former entrance into the medieval deer park from the road near this point, indicated by surviving parallel ditches and banks, 15m apart, crossing the pasture field at the north-west corner of Barnsdale Wood.

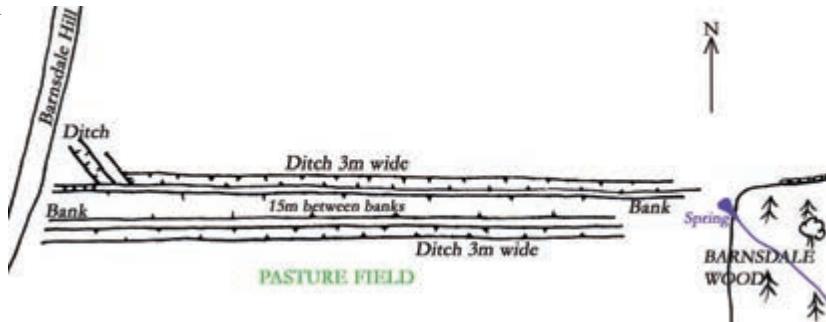
Elaine and Clive Jones also explored the eastern edge of Barnsdale Wood at the Exton/Whitwell parish boundary (SK 892093), where ‘wave action had revealed the outer bank and ditch and inner stone wall’. The remains of an adjacent stone causeway or bridge can be seen entering the wood at low water level (*Rutland Record* 18, 366).

*Barnsdale Wood, showing its location in relation to the parish boundary and Rutland Water (Elaine Jones)*



*Tree stumps on the shore of Rutland Water indicating the former extent of Barnsdale Wood (RO)*

*Two banks about 15m apart, flanked by 3m-wide ditches at the north-west corner of Barnsdale Wood (Elaine Jones)*



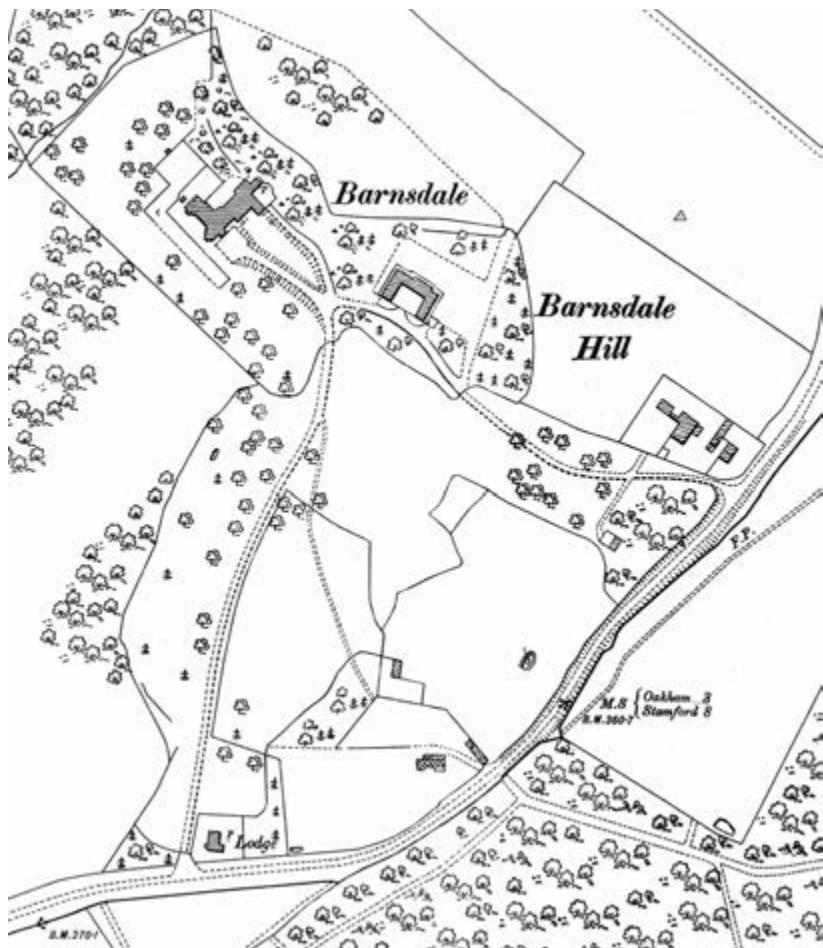
*Left: Earthworks at the north-west corner of Barnsdale Wood (SH)*

*Below: The eastern boundary of Barnsdale Wood and adjacent causeway exposed on the shore of Rutland Water (Elaine Jones)*

During the nineteenth century, particularly with the coming of the railways, Rutland once again became a magnet for lovers of hunting. Now, however, huntsmen and hounds pursued foxes instead of deer, across enclosed fields and wooded coppices, rather than within the confines of a wooded deer park. Wealthy businessmen and aristocrats were attracted by the proximity of the Cottesmore, Belvoir and Quorn hunts to build hunting lodges around the county. These included Springfield and Catmose in Oakham, Hambleton Hall and the new Barnsdale Hall, built in 1890 for the Fitzwilliam family. The architect was E J May, who had been involved in designing Bedford Park, England's first garden suburb, in 1875. He adopted a neo-Tudor design 'with a canted two-storey bay and tiled roofs' (Pevsner 1984, 285).



Barnsdale Hall  
and grounds,  
from the OS  
2nd ed 25"  
map 1904



Barnsdale Hall  
from a picture  
postcard dated  
23rd December  
1907 (Hart)





*Barnsdale Hall from the east in 2006 (SH)*

his wife Evelyn and eighteen servants. In future years his son, William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam (1904-79), would become the 10th Earl Fitzwilliam ([www.thepeerage.com](http://www.thepeerage.com)).

When the 1901 Census was taken, Barnsdale Hall in Rutland was occupied only by two housemaids and a kitchen maid. Its stables provided accommodation for two stablemen and a coachman, while the stud groom and gamekeeper lived with their families on Barnsdale Hill. At Barnsdale Hall Gate (now a much enlarged guest house on the shores of Rutland Water) lived the gardener with his wife and twin babies. On the night of the census they were enjoying a visit from his sister-in-law, from Yorkshire, and her two small children.



*Barnsdale Hall from the south in 2005 (RO)*

By the late twentieth century, the world had changed. While hunting attracted a more democratic clientele, new purposes were found for the Victorian mansions built as hunting lodges. As was the case at nearby Hambleton Hall, Barnsdale Hall found its position greatly enhanced by the creation of Rutland Water. New money was coming into Rutland, and the hall was bought by Derek Penman, successful builder and founder of Penwise Properties.



Outline planning permission had already been granted to convert Barnsdale Hall into a hotel and conference centre. Mr Penman then made a further application to create the Barnsdale Country Club, with luxurious health club and Scandinavian-style ‘time-share’ timber lodges, sited in landscaped parkland on the side of Barnsdale Hill. Despite opposition led by Rutland CPRE [Council for the Protection of Rural England], the proposal was accepted and the holiday complex took shape. Critics who had opposed the creation of the reservoir now feared an invasion of holiday-makers

*The house referred to as Barnsdale Hall Gate in the 1901 Census (RO)*

along its quiet shores. But careful planning and the exclusive character of the hotel and surrounding facilities have ensured that peace and tranquillity are retained, adding to the appeal of this upmarket holiday provision.



*Modern time-share holiday lodges in the grounds of Barnsdale Hall Hotel (SH)*



*The memorial to  
Geoff Hamilton  
at Barnsdale  
Gardens (SS)*

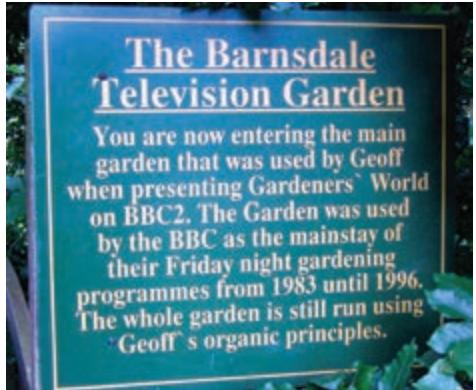
Once famed for its hunting park, Barnsdale now offers a wider range of leisure activities. A road through the woodland brings visitors to the extensive landscaped car park which, divided into different levels, is skilfully screened from the reservoir and surrounding areas. Although huntsmen no longer gallop through the medieval deer park, on a fine Bank Holiday dozens of cyclists may speed through the woodland while walkers and dogs of all shapes and ages follow the shaded path at a more leisurely pace.

Attractions for visitors to the Barnsdale area of Rutland are not restricted to the former Barnsdale Hall. A seventeenth-century farmhouse, at the crossroads of Exton Avenue and the Stamford to Oakham Road, has now become the Barnsdale Lodge Hotel. It, too, offers accommodation, dining and conference facilities. Further along the tree-lined Exton Avenue, towards the imposing gates of the privately-owned Exton Park, the tourist will find Barnsdale Gardens, established by television gardening presenter, Geoff Hamilton. Since his death in 1996, the gardens have been open to the public, who come from far afield. Many also visit the arboretum and drought garden designed by Tony Ford and Geoff Hamilton beside the Barnsdale car park at Rutland Water.



*A corner of  
Barnsdale Gardens  
in June 2006 (SS)*

Bird watchers may gaze over the lake from the wooded hide in Barnsdale Wood, while fishermen exercise their patient sport from boats in the bay, or along the lake shore. White and black Hebridean sheep may graze with their lambs on the adjacent hillsides. Sections of the surviving woods are now being maintained and coppiced by volunteers of the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. In the Spring, Barnsdale Wood becomes a misty, azure sea of bluebells veiling the hillside, while a chorus of birdsong enchants the ear.



*Top to Bottom: A notice at Barnsdale Gardens (SS)*

*Bluebells in Barnsdale Wood, May 2006 (SH)*

*Megan and Jeffrey (two young researchers into the Heritage of Rutland Water) in Barnsdale Wood, 2005 (family photograph)*

## Sheepshearing, Or the Invitation

by Samuel Messing of Exton

1.

I'd a kind invitation to merry Barnsdale,  
To meet an old friend, and be sure not to fail;  
But, when I got there, what surprised me the more,  
Instead of one friend, why I met half a score.

2.

June was the month, and all nature seemed gay,  
While ripening the flowers and the produce of May;  
Here friendship did revel on all that was good,  
While the warblers of nature all sung round the wood.

3.

Our tent was with hawthorn and poplars intwin'd,  
Where the wild rose and woodbine were wav'd by the wind;  
Our carpet was nature, and green was the floor,  
While daisies and cowslips all bow'd round the door.

4.

When clipping was done, and the table cloth laid,  
(On the ground to be sure,) from the sun in the shade,  
A profusion of pies with a ham and a tongue;  
Then afterwards music and singing a song.

5.

The ale flow'd in goblets of silver with glee,  
Beneath the green hedge and the breeze-stirring tree,  
When I look'd at the tumblers, and thought of old Time.  
It made it drink sweeter than Malaga wine.

6.

Just opposite us, t'other side of the wood,  
There's a cave once belonging to old Robin Hood;  
It puts me in mind of those days of romance,  
For 'twas said in an evening they'd come out and dance.

7.

Now we have been dancing before the tent door,  
In miniature just like those warriors of yore,  
With two or three lasses both modest and trim;  
Not like those marauders, we are true to the king.

8.

When the ev'ning was come they were all full of glee;  
Then I begg'd they'd excuse being parted from me;  
So I wish'd 'em good night for to finish the day;  
Then I mounted my pony and canter'd away.

1819.

(Messing, S, *Poems on Various Subjects*, Stamford, 1821)