

Holloway

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More often than not, it's we who bend ourselves to the will of the landscape; our thoughts and our dwelling places shaped according to the curve of valley, hill, and river.

Here, though, I've tracked down a place where the land has shaped itself to the rhythms of man.

A hollow, worn slowly away over centuries, over millennia, without conscious intent; artificial landscaping, through a wholly natural process. Tens of thousands of feet, and hooves, and cartwheels, carving out a sunken thoroughfare in a microcosmic mimicry of Ice-Age glaciers.

Holloways in the North of England are something of a rarity. They exist more commonly upon the soft chalks of the South. But here, in Chester, a solitary holloway lingers – if you know where to look.

Writing in the 12th century, a monk named Lucien wrote a guidebook account of the city. In it, he describes the holloway at the city's edge. It is, he claims, a *Vallem Demonum*. Valley of Demons. A well-known haunt of ruthless thieves and cutthroats. The lair, they say, of a spectral hellhound with teeth like knives. So much inescapable terror awaits on the road that must, for necessity's sake, be trod.

In response to the echoing howls within, whether victim-made or devil-sent, a shrine is set up near the mouth of the hollow, by a wealthy religious guild named the Fraternity of St Anne, so that fearful travellers might gird themselves with holy protection against the dangers ahead...

Nowadays, the brigands are long gone and the hellhound, it seems, has retreated to the shadows. The holloway lying within the city centre has been domesticated, almost beyond recognition. It picks its way along Frodsham Street and Brook Lane, its modern-day incarnations, scarred by the ceaseless advances of local industry that slashed at it with iron and steel, from the end of the 18th century onwards, in the creation of the canal and the railway.

From here, the holloway resurfaces to lick its wounds amongst the leafiness of Flookersbrook, slinking sullenly into the quiet suburban streets of Hoole – a name almost certainly derived from our hollow itself. Beyond Hoole, the holloway is once again struck at – this time, by the well-ordered lineation of the Millennium Greenway, a former railway line turned public path, which bustles (almost mockingly) with a steady traffic of cyclists and dog walkers.

Gathering itself, the holloway pushes through the heavy tarmac of Hoole Village, as Mannings Lane. Then, in an act of dogged defiance, it resurrects the glory of its former

significance to wayfarers – albeit in the guise of a humble country roadway – and is known reverently as ‘The Street’.

In this way, it moves in solemn procession, as in a dream, through Mickle Trafford and into the ancient parish of Plemstall. Confronted, at last, by the waters of the River Gowy, its old strength finally fails. Forlorn and defeated, it dissolves into the ceaseless pull of the current. Beyond the Gowy, its phantom tracks lead silently on, along the modern highways that have taken its place through the hills of Helsby and Frodsham.

All isn't lost, however. Tucked away, in the suburbs between Hoole and Newton, a section of the true holloway lies in hiding; a feral, wild place with traces of the ancient still heavy in the air. A place known as Newton Hollows.

I arrive there at the turning of the seasons, the day before the autumn equinox. The days are warm still, but the darkening evenings bring with them a whisper of cold yet to come. Turning aside from the asphalt streets, I wander through a narrowing alley that lurks behind the red-brick semis and back gardens. The gritstone path I tread quickly turns to mud as I journey on, and the grassy borders either side of me give way to crooked trees that arch further and further overhead.

The distant rumble of Hoole Road has fallen away now, replaced by the strange hush of the hollow. It slowly dawns on me that I've left the modern world quite behind.

The pathway here is lined with the bounty of the dwindling season. Dark, lustrous blackberries, bulging rosehips, rowan berries hanging low, bowed by the weight of a warm, wet summer's growth and still glistening with raindrops from the previous night.

I pluck a wayside blackberry and pop it eagerly into my mouth. It tastes sharp and earthy, without any of the sweetness I'd hoped for. An image of Persephone creeps to mind: the goddess of ancient Greek myth, doomed to live a month of each year in the underworld, for every tiny pomegranate seed she had eaten during her time there.

I wonder, suddenly, what sentence of years in this half-forgotten place might be doled out for devouring a whole blackberry, and look with unease down at the condemning purple stains on my fingertips.

Newton Hollows underwent certain restorations back in 2007, with signage added and some of the undergrowth getting cut back for ease of access. Many locals saw this as a theft of its magic.

Having discovered the hollow for myself today, though, I get a sense that there's something here that no amount of modern interference could ever erase.

Newton Hollows is only 500 metres long, but it feels as though I've stumbled into an endless track outside of normal space and time; somewhere hinged between here and there, then and now. I daydream that months or even years have passed in the outside world, as I've whiled away mere minutes in this curious land.

All the while, I've been twirling an oak leaf between my fingers, a souvenir I plan to take home with me. As if sensing my designs and the nearing of the hollow's end, a breeze summons itself and the leaf is yanked from my grasp, into the protective clutches of a nettle patch. I go to carefully fetch it out, but the bristling leaves make me think better of it.

Stupid of me to even presume I could take something from the living past home with me, I reflect. I'm more than a little convinced that the leaf would have crumbled to dust in my hand, anyway, the moment I'd stepped beyond the hollow's bounds.

A 19th-Century bridge crosses this age-old roadway at what is now the tail-end entrance of Newton Hollows, and a tunnel that once lead beneath it has long since been blocked up. The barrier created by this obstacle forces the modern footpath to veer off and upwards, leaving the hollow behind and crossing bridge to re-establish itself on the manicured green field on the other side, before nudging, briefly, back into the holloway's true route some distance away.

As I pass back through the unseen veil into the present day, I realise that, because of this bridge obstruction, an untamed nook of the holloway proper has been left to its own devices. Here, the path rewilds itself. I peer over the bridge at the shaded spot where Old Time still pools amongst the gathered briars.

'Good,' I think. 'Better that there's some quiet, untouched place for the ghosts and for the wild things that watch them pass by.'

The vaporous traces of the hollow's spell lift from me. Coming to, I nod a goodbye and journey onwards, along (sadly) newer, neater, and more tediously ordinary paths.



Original artwork by Russel Kirk