

## Forests, Monks & Pagans

### RUTLAND HERITAGE TRAIL SERIES



View the Heritage  
Trail Map Series

Discover Rutland is the official Destination Management Organisation for the county, aiming to promote and support tourism in the area to echo our county motto, "Multum in Parvo" (Much in Little).

Make sure to visit the Discover Rutland website and pick up our seasonal visitor guide for more inspiration.

Share your Rutland experiences with us at:

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[www.discover-rutland.co.uk](http://www.discover-rutland.co.uk)

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Front cover image - High Street, Braunston

## HERITAGE PLACES OF INTEREST

### 1 The Royal Forest of Leighfield

During the Middle Ages, large areas of land (not always completely wooded) were set aside as royal hunting grounds. The forests were protected by strict laws, and forest officials were appointed to govern them.



In Rutland, a large royal forest was established soon after the Norman Conquest. It covered most of the southern half of the modern county along with a narrow strip of western Leicestershire. By the end of the 15th century, however, the Forest of Rutland had shrunk considerably in size. The remaining forest (from Braunston to Caldecott and from Launde to Lyddington) became known as Leighfield Forest and remained in use until the middle of the 17th century. It was finally disafforested (the forest laws repealed) in around 1630.

Today, most of the trees have disappeared. Only a small remnant of the ancient forest (Prior's Coppice), the parish name and the Leigh, Lambley and Cottage Lodges survive to remind us of the Royal Forest of Leighfield.

Leighfield Lodge has a collection of many interesting buildings, including a late 16th century large stone house, a stone and brick barn (notice the triangular ventilation holes), and the decorative octagonal building in the gardens to the right. The Lodge is place-name evidence for the Leighfield "town" that once existed in the medieval forest.

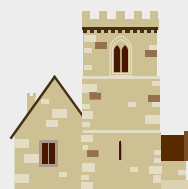
### 2 Prior's Coppice

The only substantial remains of the medieval forest, Priors Coppice is now a Nature Reserve run by the Leicestershire and Rutland Trust for Nature Conservation. Visitors are welcome to explore the various paths in the woods.



### 3 St. Peter's Church, Brooke

Although the small parish church of St. Peter was (unusually) rebuilt during the reign of Elizabeth I, much remains of the earlier Norman building. The low plain tower dates from the 13th century, but you enter through a fine zigzag archway and the north arcade has three Norman arches.



Inside the church, there is much to see, from the medieval wooden chest to the 12th-century font and the Elizabethan oak screen. Also of interest are the pictures of the Brooke Reliquary.

(Now on display in Rutland County Museum in Oakham)

### 4 Brooke Priory

A small priory of Augustinian Canons, a dependent house or cell of the abbey at Kenilworth, was founded at Brooke in the mid 1100s. Today's "Brooke Priory" is a much later brick house. It incorporates some remains of the mansion built on the medieval priory site when the parish was bought by the Noel family in 1549. In the gardens, there is an octagonal dovecote which was once the Porter's Lodge. A medieval reliquary casket for religious objects was found in the modern Brooke Priory in 1805.



(It is now on display at Rutland County Museum in Oakham)

### 5 The Braunston Sheela-Na-Gig

Outside Braunston's parish church, alongside the wall of its western tower, stands a small stone figure.

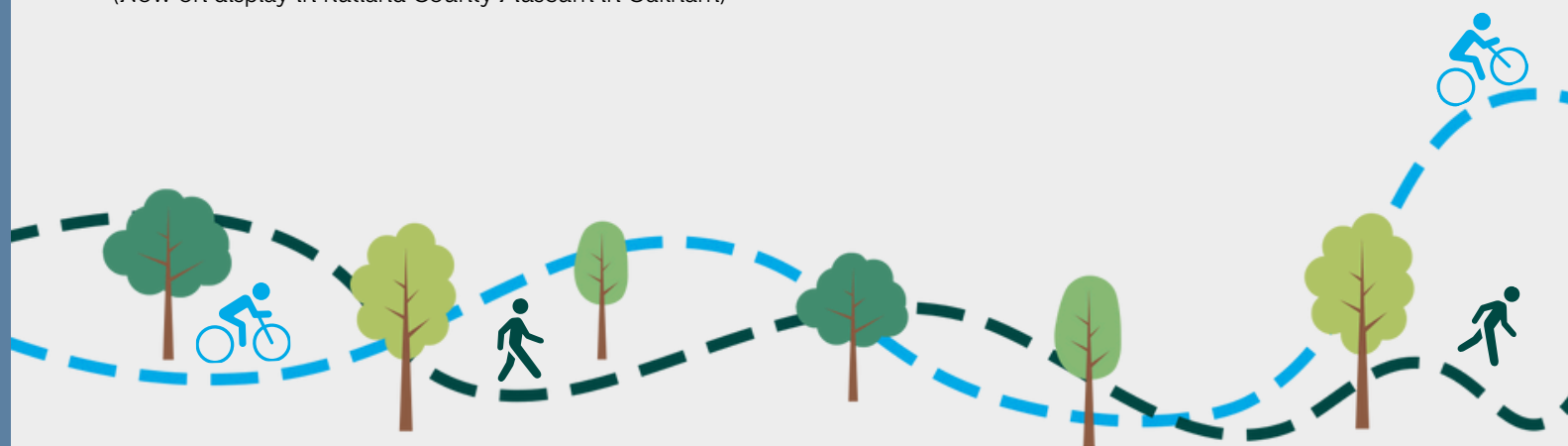


The figure has a head with two eyes set beneath a prominent eyebrow ridge. The left side of the head is heavily damaged, but traces of the second eye remain, along with an unusual second "nose." Below the eyes is a large open mouth, seemingly depicting a tongue. Deeply carved striations run along both sides of the figure, creating a distinctive "concertina" effect. Beneath these markings, the figure has fairly prominent breasts, though the right one is damaged. While the figure is quite distinctive, it would not be out of place among other medieval sculptures.

This four-foot-high carved figure was hidden for many years, set as a stone in the threshold of the church doorway. During renovation, it was discovered and placed in its modern position. No one knows what its history is, but one belief is that the figure is a "Sheela-Na-Gig". These are semi-erotic stone carvings usually found at Norman or Romanesque churches and known throughout Europe as architectural grotesques.

Sheela-Na-Gigs are typically associated with the appearance of an older woman or "hag", and are overtly sexual in nature. Their exact purpose remains a mystery, but theories include that she is a fertility symbol; survival of an ancient pagan site which became incorporated into a Christian church; a warning against lust; or protection against evil.

Whatever she might bring to you, why not take some time to examine the figure and then have a look inside the 12th century All Saints church?



## RUTLAND HERITAGE TRAIL No. 5

Braunston | Brooke

### LENGTH



Approximately 5 miles. Allow 1 to 2 hours.



8½ miles

### START AND FINISH



All Saints Church, Braunston, LE15 8QS

### TERRAIN



Mixture of field footpaths and roads. There are some uphill stretches.



Mostly quiet roads, with ups and downs!

### REFRESHMENTS



Braunston - The Blue Ball



**From Braunston to Caldecott, Launde to Lyddington, much of the south-west of Rutland was covered by the ancient Royal Forest of Leighfield during the Medieval Ages.**

Leighfield Forest is a remnant of the ancient and much larger forest of Rutland, which spanned the river valleys of the Chater and the Gwash. The village of Leighfield has long since been lost, but traces can still be found in wooded areas such as Prior's Coppice.

The forest was also home to a religious order. In Brooke, a small priory of Augustinian canons was established, while at Braunston, there is evidence of much earlier pagan beliefs.

**Please park considerably, and remember to respect our beautiful countryside. Follow the Highway & Country codes, and take care when crossing busy roads.**

### BIKE HIRE

A range of bikes, e-bikes, child seats and even dog buggy attachments can be hired from Specialized at Rutland Cycling, Whitwell, LE15 8BL

There are several venues around the county that participate in our e-bike scheme, more information can be found online at

[www.discover-rutland.co.uk/e-bikes](http://www.discover-rutland.co.uk/e-bikes)





# The Walk

Start in Braunston and head south on Wood Lane, passing the weir on your left. After ¼ mile, as the road bends left, continue straight onto a dead-end track past farm buildings. Look for a footpath to the left, through a kissing gate, and head diagonally across the field to the opposite hedge. Cross the stile and footbridge, walking toward Prior's Coppice. ① ②

Once over a stile, climb uphill, and as the ground levels, reach a stony farm road. Cross straight over and follow the marked footpath downhill. At another farm road, turn left on the track and continue, following the track as it bends left, avoiding the roads marked private.

Pass alongside Leigh Lodge, and look for a bridleway sign pointing left and right. Turn left, heading uphill along a tarmac farm road. Continue forward to a gateway, passing farm buildings and Leigh Lodge Cottages. Walk through a set of stone gate pillars and follow the road to the main highway.

Turn right on the highway and walk to a junction. Take the left-hand turn and descend into Brooke village. ③ Continue left along the road, passing Town Park Farm. Soon, Brooke Priory ④ appears on the right. Look for a footpath through a gate on the left, skirting the field with a hedge on your right. You will come to a wooden footbridge on your right, cross and continue straight over the track.

Cross a stile and head left toward the next stile in the hedge. Once over, turn right and follow the grass path alongside the hedge, with the River Chater to your right. Cross another stile into the next field, through a newly planted coppice.

Continue through the gateways until the houses of Braunston come into view. In the final field, head to the right-hand corner, crossing a small stream via stepping stone and fence into Panter's Lane. Follow this lane past gardens and driveways, emerging opposite All Saints church to complete your walk. ⑤

# The Cycle Ride

Start in Braunston, near All Saints parish church, and take Wood Lane out of the village, passing the weir on your left. Cycle uphill, and as the road bends left, continue straight ahead on the marked dead-end road. Stay on this route until a right-hand turn. Take this turn and pass through stone gate pillars, entering Prior's Coppice. ②

Cycle downhill on the bridleway (marked private but accessible), being mindful of speed humps. At the bottom, you'll see Leigh Lodge, a remnant of the medieval forest town of Leighfield. Turn left in front of the lodge and cycle downhill, crossing the River Chater and medieval fishpond remains. Head uphill past Long Wood until you reach a junction. Turn left and follow the farm road to Wills Farm and the estate office.

Continue along Holygate Road to Ridlington. After about a mile, take the first left into West Lane as you enter the village. The road bends into Main Street, with the parish church visible ahead. Pass through the village, following the road as it curves right to the top road. Turn left, then left again onto Brooke Road.

Cycle downhill into the River Chater Valley, then uphill past Jubilee Lodge toward a crossing with the road to America Lodge. Descend into Brooke, where St. Peter's Church ③ is on the right if you'd like to explore. Otherwise, take the road left, passing Brooke Priory, ④ a later brick house with remains of the Noel family mansion built after the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Cycle past Brooke Priory, cross a small brick bridge and take the next left-hand turn. The final stretch climbs gently back into Braunston, ending where you began. ⑤

## TRAIL NO.5 - FORESTS, MONKS & PAGANS

