A Self-Guided Walk for Ryebank Fields

LOCATION

Ryebank Fields is in Chorlton (Manchester) but is bordered on two sides by Stretford (Trafford).

First of all get your bearings… as you enter Ryebank Fields from Longford Road in Chorlton, M21 9WW (standing with your back to the road), straight ahead is north looking towards Firswood; to your right, St. John's School is to the east; to your left is Longford Park to the west and behind you towards Edge Lane is south. Our circular walk starts here but you can also enter Ryebank Fields from the Trafford side, at the end of Rye Bank Road, post code M16 0HB, and start the walk at Point 6.

HISTORY

Much of the information that follows is based on the memories of local people and is true to the best of our knowledge.

• According to John Lloyd's book, *"The Township off Chorlton-cum-Hardy"* the surrounding area was once part of the Forest of Arden, an extensive area of woodland, on either side of the River Mersey, which consisted mainly of Oak and Willow.

• It's likely that the area around Ryebank Fields later became arable land and possibly formed part of Firs Farm, in Firswood, which was located where St. Hilda's School is today.

• Ryebank Fields lies on a deposit of boulder clay and around the late 1800s/early 1900s it became clay pits for Jackson's Brickworks. The pits were at least 40 feet deep and stretched across both fields, coming to within 6 feet of the gardens of local properties.

• The brickworks closed in the 1930s and the pits were abandoned and filled with rainwater. They became a giant adventure playground, and children would sail make-shift rafts across them.

• Sadly, a child drowned and the Council decided to fill the lakes in and the area subsequently became an unregistered tip. This was especially prominent from the end of World War II.

• Manchester City Council (MCC) acquired ownership of the land in 1968 and in the early '70s it was reclaimed by the City Parks Department and remediated under the publicly funded 'Operation Eyesore'. It was levelled and topped with aggregate and topsoil to make it safe to walk and play on. Since this time the root structures of trees and vegetation have formed a further layer of protection.

• In the mid '70s the land was gifted to Manchester Polytechnic as sports fields. Local people remember that it was gifted under covenant to be used for education purposes only, but Manchester City Council (MCC) have said they are unable to find any record of this covenant despite it being retained on the land where the school is now.

• According to Manchester City Council (MCC), the land was then formally transferred to Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in 1992, as a result of the 1988 Education Reform Act whereby the polytechnics were privatised and became universities.

• In April 1996, MMU moved their sports facilities to Carrington and abandoned Ryebank Fields. In December of the same year, MMU submitted an unsuccessful planning application for 90 houses. They appealed but their appeal was rejected on the grounds of traffic congestion and lack of alternative recreational space.

• In the early 2000s, MMU contemplated selling off the Fields for a second time. Plans were drawn up; however, no formal planning application was submitted.

• In the mid 2000s, local people submitted a Village Green application for the land. The application was unsuccessful essentially because the land is bordered by Manchester and Trafford.

• The SAVE RYEBANK FIELDS campaign was set up in 2018 to fight this latest attempt by MMU to profiteer from the sale of the land. Local people have been caretakers of this land since MMU abandoned it 30 years ago.

• In December 2019, MMU undertook intrusive site investigations at Ryebank Fields. They decimated the land and left contaminants from discarded core sample tubes scattered at surface level. This resulted in an asbestos decontamination unit being required to make the land safe again.

• In April 2020, the Friends of Ryebank Fields submitted a request for Ryebank Fields to be designated as a 'Local Green Space' in MCC's new Local Plan. The Local Plan is due to be finalised in 2026.

• In September 2020, MMU announced their intention to sell the land to a developer. The Friends of Ryebank Fields (FORF) put forward an expression of interest to buy the land but this was rejected due to not being a plan for development. The Chorlton Community Land Trust (formerly Chorlton Community Led Housing Group) were involved in discussions with the shortlisted developers to promote their vision of development on Ryebank Fields.

• In July 2022, MMU announced Step Places and Southway Housing Trust as their chosen development partners. The developers held an initial consultation on their proposals in early 2023.

• In July 2024, MMU again undertook invasive site investigations at Ryebank Fields, this time during nesting and breeding season, putting wildlife at risk and causing havoc in terms of traffic congestion.

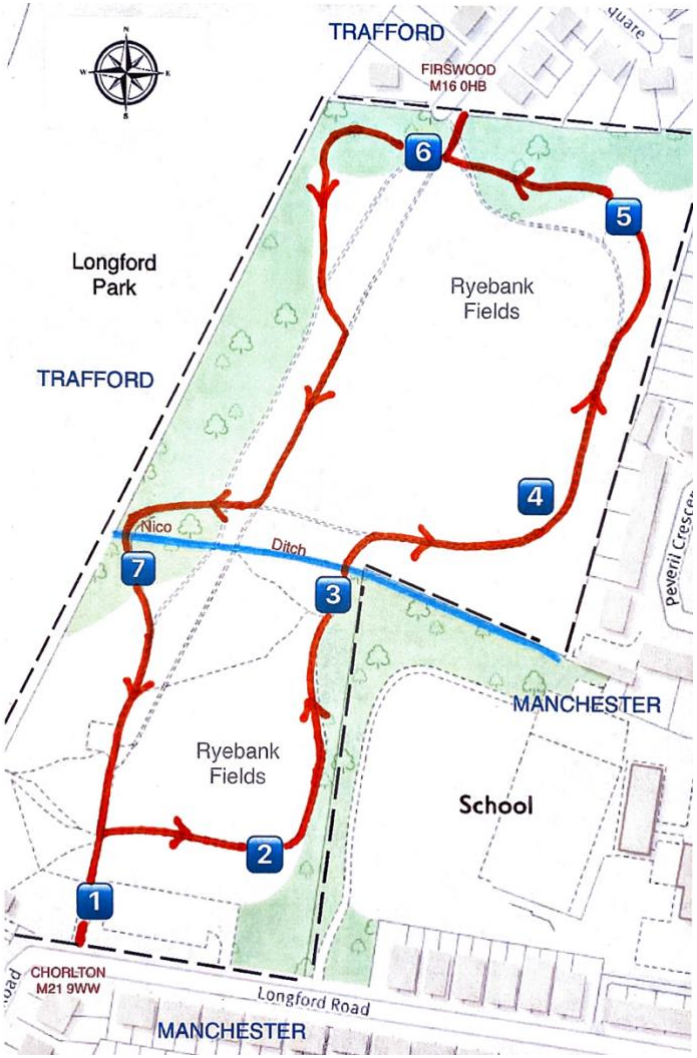
• In March 2025, MMU and development partners, Step Places, Southway Housing and Manchester Intergenerational Co -Housing (MICO) submitted their planning application to build 120 houses which would destroy Ryebank Fields.

• In September 2025, Ryebank Fields Community Group (RFCG) submitted an alternative, community-led planning application to retain Ryebank Fields as a Community Woodland and Meadow.

CURRENT POSITION:
Our community-led planning application is ready to be determined by Manchester City Council's Planning Committee and we are awaiting the date when it will be heard.
Conversely, the developers' planning application has been challenged by various statutory consultees, including the Environment Agency, United Utilities and the Greater Manchester Ecology Unit. As we understand it, the developers are now having to revise their plans.

THE SAVE RYEBANK FIELDS CAMPAIGN IS DETERMINED TO FIGHT ANY PLANNING APPLICATION THAT WILL DESTROY OUR FIELDS. Local people have been caretakers of this land since MMU abandoned it almost 30 years ago. It is a naturally biodiverse and rewilded wildlife haven; a much loved and well used community asset and local green space.

Please enjoy your walk today in this special place.



1.

As you enter the fields look east towards St. John's School. The school was once the site of Jackson's Brickworks and its huge chimney was said to terrify local children. The production of bricks in Manchester was dominated by two families: the Jacksons and the Harrisons, and their operations were eventually merged when the families united through marriage in 1904. In its heyday Jackson's Brickworks had sites across Manchester and Stockport, even branching out as far as Merseyside and Derbyshire. They mainly made bricks for internal walls and it is likely that the bricks within your house were produced from clay from these fields. The bricks were originally transported by a fleet of Foden steam wagons and in the Summer clouds of brick dust would settle on front door steps and window sills as they rattled by.

The hard standing area you find yourself on was once the car park for the Polytechnic playing fields. To your left towards the boundary with Longford Park was an all weather pitch with floodlights and at the end of the tarmac path there was a small building that was used as changing rooms. The rugby pitch was directly ahead of you on the southern field; two football pitches used to occupy the northern field with a long jump and discus area in the north west corner. According to MMU the pitches became unusable due to surface rubble and severe water logging.

We know the land was formerly an unregistered tip and people living close by remember some of the things that are said to have been dumped here. These include drums of oil and paint; asbestos sheeting from old Anderson shelters and garages and rubble from the demolition of the Princes Theatre on Oxford Road and excavations for the Arndale Centre. Neighbours remember a whole tipper-truck falling into one of the pits; the driver apparently jumped to safety just in time; the truck is still there. There are also reports of the MOD burying radios there after the war; it is said that they arrived with an armed guard. All manner of rubbish and waste was deposited here including coal ash from the brick kilns and there are even rumours of a small plane being buried within the landfill. It is amazing how nature has now reclaimed this former wasteland and we know that the land is only toxic if it is disturbed.

As you walk into the Fields turn right and head east towards the boundary with St. John's School.

To the west you will see a line of tall and impressive trees along the boundary with the Longford Park Conservation Area. These trees are known as **Enriqueta's Trees** and also mark the line of the Parliamentary and local authority boundaries between Manchester and Trafford. There are 10 of these mature trees in total. They stand proud, overshadowing the surrounding foliage, reaching a grand height of approximately 100 feet. Their sturdy trunks are about 4 feet in diameter, and, from historical maps of the estate, these trees can be dated to between 1885 and 1892, making them over 130 years old.

They were planted during the period when pioneering cotton manufacturer and philanthropist, John Rylands (1801-1888), was married to his third wife, Enriqueta. As her husband's health began to fail, Enriqueta Rylands took on a more prominent role in the management of the estate. She is best known for founding the John Rylands Library, as a memorial to her husband after his death, but could she also be responsible for planting our magnificent boundary trees?

The Rylands were keen horticulturists and propagated their own cuttings and seeds. The formal gardens extended over 4 acres, housing a total of 31 conservatories which produced exotic fruits such as peaches and figs. Together they took an obvious pride in the Longford parkland so it's entirely probable that the boundary trees were planted on Enriqueta's instructions if not by her hand.

The trees are a black poplar hybrid. Some black poplars are among the UK's rarest trees but are extremely difficult to identify by field study alone. In October 2020 together with the Friends of Longford Park we launched an appeal to have the trees DNA tested by the Forestry Commission. Exceeding all our expectations we raised a massive £720 within four days which enabled us to test all 10 trees. We even had to turn down donations such was the interest. It has been proven, by the overwhelming interest and generous donations from local people, that these trees are well known and well loved and are already of great local importance and conservation interest.

The DNA tests have determined that trees are a hybrid of the native Black Poplar and the Eastern Cottonwood. The tests also show that the trees are all the same female clone. This provides further evidence that they were indeed planted by Enriqueta Rylands. An older, more mature tree in the centre of the park was tested at the same time. This tree is also of the same female clone which points to the fact that the older "mother" tree was used to provide these cuttings.

Female clones were often shunned as they produce white catkins which form a fluffy material around the seeds which helps to distribute them far and wide. This white fluff can resemble snow on a summer's day and was regarded a nuisance by landscapers and gardeners. Enriqueta's contributions were and are often overlooked – could she have planted female trees to make a point?

She was certainly a remarkable woman. When John Rylands was in ill-health Enriqueta took on some of his business affairs. She had no patience with orthodox methods of procedure whether by committee, council, or board and, unafraid of being a woman in a man's world, created a life-sized photo of her husband to display in his firm's boardroom both making her presence felt and showing she had his full confidence and support. After his death she inherited his businesses and shares, carried on and expanded their good works, devoted much of her considerable wealth to education and religious missions and became the first woman to be honoured with the Freedom of the City of Manchester.

The John Rylands Library is seen as her greatest achievement. This world-famous building is a striking example of neo-Gothic architecture and houses many special collections of books. It's also renowned as one of the first buildings in Manchester to generate and be lit by electricity. Enriqueta was known to be forward thinking, ahead of her time. Black Poplars were planted to combat pollution and were heralded as the climate solution of the times, so the boundary trees could also be her very fitting contribution.

These trees have a very special history, they are well-known and well-loved and are integral to the character of Longford Park. We must ensure they are saved as a testament to Enriqueta Rylands and her legacy.

2.

One of the major issues with the land at Ryebank Fields is severe water-logging, as the area sits on a natural deposit of boulder clay which restricts drainage. This is most apparent here in the southern field. The cellars of surrounding properties are often flooded, to the extent that United Utilities have given pumps to affected residents. Historically the whole area around Ryebank, Longford, Newport and Nicolas roads used to be known as 'The Isles.' It was the location of a series of streams and pools that may have been tributaries to the River Mersey. Longford Brook is still culverted beneath the northern field and Black Brook used to run close to the northern perimeter.

As a result of the marshy conditions, the southern field was the most adversely effected by MMU's 2019 site investigations. Their machines left huge ruts and surface water remained making the area even more soggy and water-logged. To turn a negative into a positive our local community came together to plant over 300 daffodil bulbs in the riven ground. Daffodils represent regeneration and new life and we look forward to seeing our **Bulbs of Hope** bloom in Spring for many years to come.

As you look around the southern field, note the number of Oak trees; some merely saplings and some now reaching maturity. Our **Millennium Oaks** were planted by a local resident who, after MMU's last attempt to build in the late '90s, was encouraged to plant trees, in the year 2000, to combat global warming, as it was then known. He used to walk his dogs twice a day on Ryebank Fields and thought he could kill two birds with one stone by locking-up carbon dioxide and making the Fields less attractive to a developer by populating it with Oak trees. He collected acorns from several trees around Chorlton (to keep some genetic diversity) and planted a few every time he went for a walk. Now, twenty years later, the trees that came up in the first year are quite a respectable size. We have counted around 200 across the two Fields. The trees were positioned to complement the existing terrain and flora and to avoid encroaching on the gardens of current residents. More trees come up each year with the wildlife taking over and acorns now being planted by squirrels and jays. Oak was chosen because of its longevity, its ability to grow to a large size and its iconic Englishness.

A single Oak tree sustains over 280 types of insects which in turn attract birds and wildlife and promote natural biodiversity. Acorns were traditionally used as food and fodder for animals and Oaks are said to have restorative and medicinal qualities so just walking amongst these trees should give you a sense of well being.

It's said that Oak trees were worshipped by the Druids, with 'Duir' being the ancient word for Oak. We've all heard of the Royal Oak which derives from when King Charles II hid in an Oak tree to escape the Roundheads at the Battle of Worcester in 1651. It's true that Oaks are steeped in history and as you follow the eastern boundary north towards the middle of the Fields you are now walking firmly in the footsteps of the Anglo-Saxons.

3.

Stop just before the dip in the path as you are now approaching the historic **Nico Ditch**, a 6 mile linear earthwork, which stretches across south Manchester, from Ashton Moss in the east to Moorside, another area of moss land, in Urmston, to the west. Nico Ditch dates to between 600 - 1000 AD and is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086.

The Nico Ditch marks the ancient boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. To the south you are standing in Mercia and to the north, as you cross the ditch, you will enter Northumbria. The ditch is dug in the 'U' shape typical of boundary demarcation rather than the 'V' shape used for defensive fortifications. Nico Ditch is a linear frontier akin to Offa's Dyke, which formed the Anglo Saxon boundary between England and Wales, and Hadrian's Wall, the Roman frontier between England and Scotland. Sections of the Nico Ditch at Platt Fields Park and Denton Golf Course are listed as Scheduled Ancient Monuments by Historic England, however, much of the earthwork has been lost with the ditch at Ryebank Fields being the only remaining section to survive in the west.

Legend has it that the Nico Ditch was completed in a single night by the inhabitants of Manchester who stood side by side, with each man digging his own height, as a protection against Viking invaders who sailed up the River Mersey in 870. According to 19th century folklore, the ditch was the site of a bloody battle with the Danes which gave their names to the nearby towns of Gorton, deriving from 'gore town' and Reddish deriving from 'red ditch,' however, it's far more likely that these names mean 'dirty farmstead' and 'reedy ditch' respectively.

The name Nico possibly derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'hnickar' a water spirit who seized and drowned unwary travellers, or alternatively from 'næcan' the Anglo-Saxon verb to 'kill.' The ditch is also referred to as 'Mykelldiche' or 'magnum fossatum' meaning the 'great ditch'.

Interestingly, the name of nearby 'Nicolas' Road is thought to derive from 'Nico' ditch and it is likely that nearby 'Oswald Road' is named after St. Oswald who was the celebrated King of

Northumbria who died valiantly in a bloody battle against King Penda of Mercia around the time that the Nico Ditch was created.

Cross over the ditch to enter the northern Field and Northumbria, taking the path immediately to your right towards the eastern perimeter of the Field.

Before you turn right look straight ahead to find the Ryebank Fields **Faerie Thorn Tree**.

According to Celtic folklore, a lone Hawthorn tree growing in the middle of a field is a faerie tree. This type of tree is believed to be the gateway between the mortal world and the nether world of the faeries. The magical folk are very protective of their portal and, as legend has it, will severely punish those who damage or cut down their tree. A single hawthorn should be treated with respect and with much wariness. It is thought to bring good fortune and prosperity to the land, but it must never be cut or harmed for fear of inciting the wrath of the faeries. The tree is a sacred meeting place for the wee folk, who can oft be seen dancing around their tree at midnight. A Faerie Thorn is often located near to an archeological site, well or spring, with its magic hidden deep in the earth surrounding it. The faeries bury their pots of gold under the hawthorn, but you must never disturb the ground or take a nap in its shade as you may be whisked off to the faerie realm, unlikely to ever find your way back.

Even today there is a reverence for Faerie Thorns. In Belfast, the failure of the DeLorean Car Plant, famous for the DMC-12 featured in the Back to the Future Films, is blamed on the vengeance of the faeries. The company went bankrupt after cutting down a Faerie Thorn during the construction of their Belfast factory. Moreover, highway construction workers in Ireland, have been known to divert the course of roads so as to leave a single hawthorn standing.

Hawthorn is distinguished by its sharp, woody thorns and serrated leaves. Wands made of hawthorn are said to be extremely powerful and Maypoles were originally made from its wood; it was also said that witches made their brooms from its branches. Blooming in spring, the hawthorn is associated with the ancient festival of Beltane. At this time, the tree is covered with clusters of flowers in shades of white or pink, but don't ever bring a bough of blooms into your house as it's very unlucky to do so.

So, beware! Don't ever cut down a Faerie Thorn or the curse of the faeries will fall upon
you.

4.
The eastern perimeter of the northern Field borders Peveril Crescent which was built in the '60s on land that was formerly allotments. It's notable that building went ahead there rather than on the Fields which fuels speculation that this was because the land

here was deemed unfit for development due to the issues of landfill and flooding.

When the Fields were turned into sports pitches in the early '70s two methane pipes were inserted into the ground, one here behind Peveril Crescent and one further north behind Copley Road. The pipes were approximately an inch and a half in diameter and stood about 4 inches proud from ground. They are probably still here but are likely to have been covered over the years by grass and leaves.

One of the large trees adjacent to the houses is a mature apple tree and close by you will also see some younger fruit trees. This is our **Community Orchard** where a popular Wassail ceremony is held each year on Old Twelfth Night. The trees were planted by the community in 2020, in memory of Joe, who lived on Peveril Crescent, and started the orchard several years ago when he planted apple and cherry trees on the Fields, to the rear of his garden, so that people passing by could help themselves to the fruit. His neighbours and friends have since continued to look after these trees on his behalf.

The path you have walked so far has been bordered by a multitude of blackberry bushes which are abundant in this area too. Brambles and scrub are vital for wildlife giving them safe homes and a sustainable food source.

As you walk northwards along the eastern boundary between the houses of Peveril Crescent and Copley Road, close to a single storey garage block, you will cross over the culverted Longford Brook which flows beneath the Fields. The two trees in front of the garages are London Plane, a species noted for their air cleaning properties. These trees were saved from destruction a few years ago when campaigners prevented MMU operatives from chopping them down after storm damage. Notice how, as you continue northwards, the ground occupied by the houses is much lower than the Fields. There is a 2-3 metre drop indicating the scale of the remediation and the landfill in the former clay pits is said to be only 6 feet away from the gardens of these properties.

5.

The hedgerow along the Eastern perimeter to the rear of Copley Road is mainly Hawthorn, and is thought to pre-date the Enclosures of the 18th Century, so is likely to be an Ancient Hedgerow.
The line of trees along the northern perimeter of the Fields, behind Park Square, marks the municipal boundary between Manchester and Trafford.

It is interesting to note that the Manchester/Trafford boundary runs parallel to the Nico Ditch. This is consistent across other areas of Manchester. Often linear boundaries would cover a wide area e.g. Hadrian's Wall consisted of the wall, a ditch or 'vallum' and the 'Stanegate,' a Roman road that linked the forts and villages along the wall. It is possible therefore that the area between the Nico Ditch and the municipal boundary, i.e. whole of the northern field could have been part of a wider boundary feature.

The municipal boundary extends from the north east corner of the Fields across one end of Great Stone Road. Here two ‘stones’ are marked on old ordnance maps on either side of the road. One of these stones can still be seen on land owned by United Utilities on the eastern side of the road, the other, if it still exists, may be in the garden of a nearby house. The stones may be boundary stones and may have marked the meeting point of three boundaries ~ also known as a ‘Trifinium’ ~ as there was a former boundary between Stretford and Trafford running east from Chester Road.

It’s also interesting to note that the other end of Great Stone Road, where it meets Chester Road (the old Roman Road between Manchester and Chester), was the original location of the Great Stone, which is listed with Historic England. The Great Stone has two hollows or wells in its surface and it is most likely to have been the base of an Anglo-Saxon cross shaft. It is also said that it could have been a plague stone and that travellers, who had to pay a toll to enter Manchester, would first dip their coins into one well that was filled with vinegar and then into the other that was filled with Holy water to ensure it didn’t carry the plague. According to legend, the Roman giant, Tarquin, threw the Great Stone from the ramparts of the Roman fort at Castlefield, in Manchester, and in so doing the hollows in its surface were made by his finger and thumb. It is also said that the Great Stone is slowly sinking and when it finally sinks forever it will determine the end of the world. The Great Stone was moved when the road was widened but can still be seen, a short distance away from its original location, at the Chester Road entrance to Gorse Hill Park.

The **Aspen Grove** at the centre of the northern perimeter is one of the most beautiful features of Ryebank Fields. The path through the centre has been maintained by local people over the years as the grove of trees has grown and expanded, making it a unique and special feature.

Aspen derives from the Greek word ‘aspis’ meaning ‘shield’ which was one of the many traditional uses of its wood. The Latin name for the tree is Populus tremula or Populus tremuloides, otherwise known as quaking Aspen due to the way its leaves tremble and shake in the wind. This is due to the fact that one side of the leaf stem is flattened. It is said to be the most restless and fidgety of trees. Its leaves make a watery and fluid sound as they move which can often be mistaken for rain or running water. The poem ‘Summer Images’ by John Clare talks about a shepherd boy running for shelter from the rain, having been deceived by the wind in the Aspen leaves.

The leaves turn a vibrant gold in Autumn and a crown made of Aspen leaves was said to give its wearer the power to visit and return safely from the Underworld. In Celtic mythology, the visual effect of an Aspen trembling in the wind was said to be the tree communicating between this world and the next.

Before you enter the wood, have a think about how many trees there might be. You may be surprised to learn that there could be just one! This is due to the rhizomatic nature of their root systems. Aspens grow in clinal colonies derived from a single seedling, and

spread by means of root suckers. Each tree within a clone has an identical genetic profile and the Aspen sequester twice as much carbon as other trees due to their vast underground root structure.

As you go into the Aspen Grove, look out for the **Wishing Tree,** on the inside edge to your left. It is not easy to spot at first so you may have to search to find it. The Wishing tree is a Silver Maple, Acer saccharinum, distinguishable by its delicately palmated leaves which have a downy silver underside that produces a radiant effect when exposed to the light. There are many maples on Ryebank Fields, but this tree is special due to the wishing well that lies hidden in its trunk. The trunk is forked with at least four limbs having branched out from its centre. It would appear that damage to one of these limbs has caused it to break off resulting in a hole which has subsequently filled with rainwater to create our well.

It is believed that if you make a wish out loud at a wishing well your wish will come true! Please don't disturb the water or place coins or any other objects in the well as a tree hole is a mini ecosystem that is often overlooked. The well water contains decomposed leaves, mosses and twigs which provide energy for bugs, bacteria and larvae to thrive. In turn the insects that evolve from here provide a food source for birds and small mammals.

Wishing trees are popular in many cultures around the world, for example, the Hindu Banyan tree, the Japanese Tanabata, and the Celtic Clootie. These trees are identified as having an intrinsic spiritual value as it is believed that wishes are granted by a specific nature spirit or religious entity associated with the tree according to local traditions.

The Silver Maple is often found along waterways and in wetlands, leading to the colloquial name of 'water maple'. It's therefore significant that many maples are found on Ryebank fields as the area was previously known as 'the Isles' as it was made up of a series of streams and tributaries to the River Mersey. Maples can live for up to 130 years and are highly adaptable trees that can happily
exist in many different soil types and climates. Their seeds are joined together in winged-pairs called samaras, which fly and spin on the wind like mini-helicopters to aid their dispersal.

Its rapid growth and resilience make the Silver Maple a symbol of strength and fortitude. In folklore it represents life, longevity and balance. The wood is said to be protective and for this reason was often incorporated into door frames. Maple is also associated with offerings. The tree feeds people with its sweet sap (maple syrup) and wildlife uses the tree in various ways: the seeds are a primary food for squirrels and for birds who find a safe haven to nest in its wide, sprawling branches, and its leaves are rich in nutrients for moths.

Maple is one of the most prominent trees on Ryebank Fields with various types growing here including the Silver; Norway; Red and Sycamore varieties

Walk through the Aspen Grove and stop on the other side at the Trafford entrance to the Fields. Take care on the path as many of the Aspen roots stand proud from the ground.

6.

The houses whose gardens back on to the northern side of the Fields are in Park Square Trafford. This was the site of a bomb blast during World War 2, and is plotted on bomb maps for Manchester. Stained glass windows in the doors of neighbouring properties on Copley Road (to the East) were sucked either inwards or outwards by the circular force of the blast and shrapnel was embedded in rooftops. The next recorded blast point was on Newport Road in Chorlton so it follows that the bombs were dropped across Ryebank Fields. As at the time of the raids, the Fields was abandoned clay pits filled with water, there is speculation as to whether unexploded bombs could still exist below the ground and the site is classified as a medium to high risk unexploded ordnance area.

The target for the bombs was the Thirlmere Aqueduct which runs directly along the Northern perimeter of the Fields below where you are standing. The aqueduct is a 96 mile-long water supply system that carries water to Manchester from the Thirlmere Reservoir in the Lake District. It was built to carry approximately 55,000,000 imperial gallons per day and is the longest gravity-fed aqueduct in the country, with no pumps along its route. The water flows at a speed of 4 miles per hour and takes just over a day to reach the city, flowing as far as Heaton Park Reservoir in Prestwich.

You are now standing at the end of Rye Bank Road in Firswood. MMU's development plans include opening up this side of the Fields to traffic. There is no established vehicular access here and local residents are vehemently opposed to these proposals which would destroy their cul-de-sac community. If you venture out onto the road you will see the Trafford Rye bank Community Garden. The garden was sponsored Trafford council and has been designated as an Asset of Community Value. It is often said that Ryebank Road was intended to be a through road as the house numbers are sequential on either side of the Fields. This is untrue as the speeling of each road is different: 'Ryebank' in Chorlton and 'Rye Bank' in Firswood, and the houses on each side were originally numbered as two separate roads but this was later changed in 1926. It is, however, likely that the two roads were named after the same geographical feature.

The origins of place names can give us many clues to the past so it's interesting to take a closer look at the etymology of the area. Looking at the road names: 'Ryebank' derives from either 'rye' the crop or grass or possibly from 'rie' which is an old form of 'river' and 'bank' could refer to the bank of a river or stream or possibly the bank of the Nico Ditch. 'Longford' easily translates as a long ford or 'shallow crossing place'. There is another Longford Road on the Western side of the park which meets Chester Road adjacent to Longford Bridge which is the point where Longford Brook enters the Bridgewater Canal. It is therefore possible that the 'long' 'ford' stretched as far as this point.

'Stretford' dates back to Roman times. The name derives from 'stræt' meaning 'street' and 'ford' meaning 'shallow crossing place' as the parish grew up around the crossing point of the River Mersey (where Crossford Bridge is now) on the old Roman Road from Chester to Manchester, i.e. the A56 Chester Road.
'Chorlton' is Anglo-Saxon in origin and the first settlement here dates back to somewhere between 600 - 1000 AD. The name derives from 'ceorl' meaning 'countryman' or 'peasant' and 'ton' which is a suffix meaning 'farmstead' or 'clearing' that can be seen in many place names of the time, e.g. Ashton, Denton, Urmston. It's also worth noting that other villages along the length of the Nico Ditch have Anglo-Saxon names e.g. Levenshulme and Davyhulme; the suffix 'hulme' comes from the Old Saxon 'holmr' meaning 'island' or 'raised land in a marsh.'

There were four areas within the township of Chorlton: these are Chorlton, Hardy, Martledge and Hough End. Interestingly Ryebank Fields is in 'Martledge' a name which derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'mær' meaning boundary and 'læc' meaning 'lake', 'loch' or 'leach'. This obviously has links to the Nico Ditch and municipal boundary and the area once being known as 'The Isles'. The name of the River 'Mersey' can also be traced to mean boundary from 'mær' and river from 'ea' meaning 'running water' or 'ees'.
Follow the old perimeter path into the trees towards the western boundary with Longford Park, then turn southwards. The old perimeter path becomes lost, it has been overgrown with brambles which form an important wildlife habitat, and you will meet the central path again on your way back.

7.
Along the western perimeter where the Fields meet Longford Park you can still see the mounding that was installed around the Fields, at all entry points, by MMU in 2007, in an unsuccessful attempt to keep local people out.

The largest continuous section of hedgerow lies between Ryebank Fields and Longford Park along this boundary. It is approximately 270 metres long is particularly spectacular in spring with abundant Hawthorn blossom tumbling down to the ground. To coincide with the first ever National Hedgerow week, in May 2021, it was surveyed by the Greater Manchester Ecology Unit (GMEU) who confirmed that it fulfils a number of criteria set by the government to make it a **hedgerow of 'importance'**. These include: its age, it is approximately 100 years old; it contains a variety of woody species, including, Elder, Holly and Hazel; it contains a native Black Poplar tree (see below), and it intersects an archaeological feature, namely the Nico Ditch. This hedgerow is therefore protected by law.

The furthest north of the Poplar trees in the hedgerow can be seen at around the midpoint of the boundary on the north field. The tree sits quite deep in the hedgerow and is flanked by vegetation on both sides making it difficult to pick out, but it is a truly stunning specimen with long low-sweeping boughs that extend outwards, and hang poised just inches from the ground. Confirmed by DNA analysis it is a **native Black Poplar**, Populus Nigra subsp. Betulifolia – otherwise known as the 'Manchester' Poplar – and is one of the

UK's rarest trees. Black Poplars were mass planted in Manchester from the 19th century onwards due to their unique ability to resist the smoky polluted air of the city and thus they acquired the name of Manchester Poplars. At this time Manchester was known as Cottonopolis, with its mills casting their dust and grime over an ever-industrialising landscape. Manchester Poplars were planted to combat pollution and were heralded as the climate solution of the times. Sadly Manchester Poplars are now a rare sight as they were hit by a virulent airborne disease known as "poplar scab" in 2000, all but wiping them out in Manchester. The Ryebank Fields Manchester Poplar is of significant conservation interest, and is recognised by the Woodland Trust as a 'notable' tree. MMU's development proposals place it at considerable risk as its root system spreads well into the Fields, and its canopy and low sweeping branches overhang, making it extremely vulnerable.

On the way back you again cross the Nico Ditch and notice that it becomes lost to the west in Longford Park. The brush and brambles along the ditch in the centre of the Fields form an important wildlife corridor linking to the Mersey Valley.
Ryebank Fields is home to a diverse array of wildlife including bats, foxes, hedgehogs, squirrels, voles, rare moths, butterflies, various types of bees, crickets, damselflies and more. The most unusual animal that has been seen here is a Muntjac deer. Over 80 species of birds have been recorded on the Fields, including our resident Sparrowhawks who nest in the trees above you. For a full list of birds please see: https://ebird.org/hotspot/L6860096/media?

We've touched on some of the fauna on the Fields which is home to a variety of grasses including Yorkshire Fog, Red Fescue and Crested Dogstail. The grasses grow so tall in the Summer that you can feel like a child again. The Northern Field also boasts a glorious covering of Rosebay Willowherb amongst which children run and play hide and seek. We have rare spring fungi; orchids which enjoy the marshy conditions of the southern Field, attracting bees with their vibrant colours, and rare English bluebells whose flowers fall to one side so that they hang their heads, unlike the now more common Spanish variety which stands upright with its flowers falling on either side of the stem. Some plants including Lesser Celladine, Yellow Archangel, and Wild Garlic are ancient woodland indicators.

We've already mentioned some of the trees here on Ryebank Fields; we have counted over 1400 in total. A tree can remove 100 gallons of water from the soil around its roots every day ~ a great natural defence against water-logging ~ most of which is then released into the air by the leaves. Each tree provides a day's supply of oxygen for up to four people and absorbs over 20 kilos of CO_2 per year.

Our planet is hurtling towards climate disaster and we need to act now to stop it. One thing that is fundamental in fighting Climate Change is preserving and caring for our trees and green spaces. Manchester City Council have declared a Climate Emergency yet they have adopted a Development Framework for Ryebank Fields, which is a GREENFIELD site. This is out of step with both national

and local planning policy which promote a brownfield first approach.

You have now completed your walk. Please continue southwards along the path back through the southern field or stay awhile to enjoy this wonderful green space.

You may want to make a day of your visit by exploring the adjacent Longford Park Conservation area, where there are two cafes and toilet facilities.

When travelling to and from Ryebank Fields, please walk, cycle or use public transport. If you have to drive, please use the car parking facilities in the adjacent Longford Park. These include disabled parking bays, EV charging points and covered bike racks.

DISCLAIMER: All walks are completed at your own risk. Ryebank Fields Community Group (RFCG) has no responsibility for any accident or injury incurred. Please be careful of slip or trip hazards, e.g. muddy ground and tree roots. Please wear appropriate footwear and dress for the weather.

To find out more about our campaign and help SAVE RYEBANK FIELDS please:

- Go to our website: https://ryebankfieldscommunity.co.uk/
- Follow us on instagram: https://www.instagram.com/ryebank_fields?igsh=bHF6dGU5a3pieTFn
- Sign the petition: https://chng.it/8GBHDrjq74
- Join the FORF Facebook group: https://m.facebook.com/groups/1795200020576555