This booklet was created for ‘The Hopwas Woods Exhibition’ (2011) curated by the artist Gwyddion Flint and displayed at Tamworth’s Town Hall at the time of the Staffordshire Hoard’s display at Tamworth Castle. The exhibition is part of a wider project that will culminate in a semi-historical novel by Gwyddion. The printing of the booklet has been funded by Staffordshire County Council, as has other elements of the exhibition.

“A great opportunity to raise the profile of the natural beauty that surrounds the town of Tamworth and the village of Hopwas—incorporating stories, history, and myths of the area, as well as artworks inspired by the landscape and its wildlife.”

The exhibition contains various artefacts found in and around the woodland that have been creating a stir in local newspapers recently. Such as a ‘mysterious’ copper plate found by the West Midlands Ghost Club, and an Egyptian statuette which is alleged to have belonged to Rev. William McGregor.

Those involved in the Hopwas Project hope this exhibition will be a counterbalance to the national interest in the Staffordshire Hoard by incorporating into the event elements that reflect the beauty of the local area itself.
I’ve lived in Tamworth for most of my life but it wasn’t until recently, having decided to leave, that I really began to appreciate its history and its stories. During the summers when I was young I used to travel from one side of Tamworth to the other, and then follow the Lichfield road all the way up the hill to Hopwas Hayes Wood. For a ten year old boy that’s quite a journey. After spending most of the day in the woods, I would return home exhausted but happy.

Of course, I would be covered in mud with my trousers soaked by river, canal, pond or rain water and the immediate reward for this decorative state would be a clip round the ear. But showered, scrubbed, and drying off wrapped in a towel in the warm, it felt decidedly worth the punishment.

However, it wasn’t until I enrolled at Staffordshire University that I started thinking about Hopwas Woods for the first time since those childhood visits. A friend of mine there thought he recognised the name of Hopwas Woods when I mentioned it during a conversation about camping. He was a keen collector of science-fiction and horror paraphernalia and he pulled from his shelf a couple of pulp-fiction novels that had been written in the 70’s. One of these was titled ‘The Sucking Pit’ written by Guy N. Smith. I had a quick flick through and realised that the setting of the novel was indeed Hopwas Woods; my friend couldn’t believe the place really existed.

Hopwas Woods seems to have the somewhat uncanny ability to draw you in: to tickle under the skin like an obsession. I started to revisit my childhood haunts, and to gather tales and stories about the woods. I spent a few nights there camping, re-imagining the childhood exotic rainforest through adult eyes.

I began to find out as much about the Wood as I could and this research lead me to discover many strange things about both Hopwas itself, and indeed the Tamworth area. I talked to local residents, read old newspapers at the library, contacted other researchers via the net, and documented my visits to the woods with photographs. My search has brought me into contact with some interesting people along the way, not least Guy N. Smith himself, and the archaeologist Mark Lorenzor: both of whom have contributed articles to this booklet. It was my obsession that resulted in this exhibition at Tamworth Town Hall: a site of historical value in itself.

For this exhibition I have brought together some of those stories, histories and artworks to show that what could be seen as a group of trees by the side of the road, or an impediment to future road building, is in fact a site rich in factual history and intriguing mythology. The Saxon Hoard may be the
more famous discovery of Staffordshire, but Hopwas was once the Hunting Ground of Kings and more is to be found buried under the trees than people are aware.

If you dig just below the surface you will find all manner of stories, and not just about Saxon hoards of gold: occultists have danced naked in these woods, bumbling highway men have lived and died, secret tunnels dug, strange esoteric and Egyptian artefacts found buried beneath the soil, and a creaking grove became the resting place of royalists left to swing by their necks.

In the case of Egyptian connections, the Tamworth philanthropist Rev. William Macgregor, a renowned collector of Egyptiana, buried three mummies from his collection in different areas of Tamworth in order to preserve them from Britain’s temperate climate. One of these sites was within the foundation of the old Palace Cinema on George St. (Currently McDonald’s restaurant). It’s intriguing to think that cinema goers might have seen Boris Karloff’s ‘The Mummy’, with a real-life mummy buried just beneath the carpet and popcorn sweepings.

I hope that with this and future projects Hopwas Woods will stay in the minds and dreams of the people. If we ignore our areas of cultural and natural wealth then other uses will be found for them and there’s a possibility that Hopwas Woods could become yet another half-remembered story of something we lost in the past. Unlike the other treasures recently discovered we shouldn’t wait for this one to be lost or buried first to appreciate it.

- For more information on the stories and history of this beautiful site please visit: Mark Lorenzor’s Tamworth Time Hikes at www.tamowrthtimehikes.wordpress.com and the online interactive event that is Pastorm at www.Pastorm.com.

- I am also currently in the process of researching for a semi-historical novel based on the area, as well as an article which will hopefully appear in Alan Moore’s alternative magazine Dodgem Logic. More information for both the novel and article will be made available through www.minstral.wordpress.com soon.

Hopwas Wood 1940 – 1977

By Guy N Smith (Author)
www.guynsmith.com

I was born at White Lodge, Lichfield Road, Hopwas, then the home of my grandparents, Mr & Mrs. A. H. Weale, for many years Tamworth’s only photographers. For the next 30 years I lived at the family home, Burnt Hill House, adjacent to the waterworks.

Our home adjoined Hopwas Wood, which was to play a major part in my early life. These woodlands have always been a small sporting estate prior to their acquisition by Tarmac in later years.
The Woodhouse
The Woodhouse was occupied by Mr. Grant, who was both gamekeeper and woodsman. During the war years my father bought our first gundog from him. We relied upon the wood to supplement our meat ration during the war and as a small boy I used to accompany my father on his shooting forays. Eventually the wood was brought by Frank Price (Timber) and then changed hands again around the 1960’s.

The Woodhouse was put up for sale at an asking price of £12,000 to include 17 acres of woodland. My father and grandfather wanted to sell their respective family homes and buy this property. However, my mother and grandmother objected on the grounds that they were not going to live in the middle of a wood! George Bryan, of Drayton Manor Park, purchased the Woodhouse and lived there for a few years before selling to Leyton Greener, grandson of the iconic W. W. Greener gun-making dynasty. At that time I had taken over the shooting of Hopwas Wood under the direction of Jackson, Stops and Staff, the land agents. These were memorable years for myself.

The Woodhouse was demolished earlier this year. Sacrilege indeed! The original building dated back to the 17th century and should have been preserved.

Its demolition was needless; the reason given being that it was dangerous to those who had already severely vandalised it. So what! A beautiful county residence, it deserved restoration. I visited a few years ago. Windows were smashed, tiles had been removed from the roof and, along with interior damage syringes littered the floor. All this could have been prevented. It wasn’t. Why? I have my own suspicions that there were insidious reasons for allowing it to deteriorate to a condition in which the council approved its demolition.

The Great Starling War
In December 1961 a massive flock of starlings arrived from Eastern Europe. As their winter quarters they chose the dense rhododendrons between the reservoir and the Woodhouse. Mornings and evenings the sky was black as millions of these birds flighted to and from the surrounding fields. In the woods their stench was nauseating and the boughs of the shrubs were weighed down under layers of their droppings.

Tamworth Waterworks Committee’s fear was that the water in the underground reservoir would become polluted if the starling’s foulings seeped down into it. So a huge shoot was organized and anybody who owned a shotgun was invited to attend. This battle was arranged to take place from late afternoon until darkness over three days. Cartridges were provided. The shooting was incessant for around 1 ½ hours on each day as the starlings returned to roost in their millions. The army also assisted with exploding rockets. I recall I used two shotguns because the barrels became too hot to hold so I cooled them alternatively.

At the end of the third evening the starlings were still roosting in those rhododendrons, their stench overpowering and their chattering deafening. Neither gunfire nor rockets had deterred them. April arrived and the birds migrated whence they had come. They never returned to Hopwas Wood in those numbers again.

Novels
1975 was the year in which I began my career as an author. My second novel ‘The Sucking Pit’ was destined to become a best seller, going to numerous reprints, different cover illustrations and was
translated into many foreign languages. 2011 sees it re-launched as a Special Collectors’ Edition, bound in calf-leather and also as a limited edition.

Yet the ‘Sucking Pit’ is not just a figment of my imagination. During World War II the Luftwaffe attempted to bomb the railway at Coton Crossing and also Hopwas River Bridge. One bomb was way off target and landed inside Hopwas Wood, just beyond the canal bridge where there is still a concrete blockhouse. The bomb exploded and left a huge crater, which eventually filled with water. As the water stagnated the surface became covered with thick green slime.

When I was about 6 years old my grandfather used to take me for walks in the wood on Sunday afternoons. This bomb crater fascinated me and my grandfather’s concern was that I might sneak off and go there on my own. So he made up a story about it being bottomless and anybody who fell in was never seen again. As a result I found the crater very frightening and three decades later it was destined to become the nucleus for an occult thriller ‘The Sucking Pit’ (1975) and its sequel ‘The Walking Dead’ (1984).

Hopwas Wood, though, has not been spared the attention of ‘Black Magicians’ in real life. Some years ago naked ‘witches’ were found to be using the wood and, more recently, further occult activities are believed to have taken place with the discovery of a buried tablet bearing Egyptian symbols and an Egyptian statuette. Just what has been going on in these ancient woodlands?

**Badger Island**
Hopwas wood was also the setting for one of my children’s books ‘Badger Island’ written under my Jonathan Guy pseudonym in 1993. This was about a colony of badgers whose sett was under threat from forestry operations. This novel was launched one evening at the Thomas Barnes Primary School, booksellers James Redshaw of Lichfield organising the event. It was a highly successful launch with 100 hardback copies sold in Hopwas alone.

**The Great Fire of 1976**
During that relentless, scorching summer of 1976 fire broke out in Hopwas Wood. It lasted for several weeks, damped down but continuing to smoulder underground and threatening to re-ignite. At that time I was living in Tamworth but my parents still resided at Burnt Hill House. At one stage the fire leaped across the A51. My wife and I had already made preparations to evacuate my parents and each morning I used to go up to the wood to check on the fire’s progress. Soldiers from Whittington Barracks had been brought in on round-the-clock vigilance and damping down.

Then in August the rains came.

**Return to Hopwas Wood**
In 1977 I decided to move to pastures new. Demolition, new roads and buildings had changed the area in which I had been brought up. So my family and I moved to a beautiful area of the Shropshire/Welsh border hills, ironically my roots where my great-grandfather had farmed in the mid-nineteenth century. Much of Hopwas came with me, self-set trees which are now a mature, miniature Hopwas Wood.

A couple of years ago I returned to Hopwas Wood after a long absence. I was appalled at what I saw, the woods fenced off apart from rights-of-way, allowed to grow wild with many of my old walks
totally impenetrable. Predators dominate the wildlife scene, fox droppings in abundance and crows and magpies living off the eggs and fledglings of small birds. And doubtless grey squirrels; I remember the days when reds were a common sight.

How I would like to see this woodland returned to its former grandeur. It is in need of a team of forest management and gamekeeper. Nothing less will rescue it. Maybe I should return as gamekeeper!

Which Witch`s Woods

By Mark Lorenzor (Archaeologist)
www.Pastorm.com
www.tamworthtimehikes.wordpress.com

Hopwas Woods always draws me back, it’s the wild mysterious part of the Tamworth area. As Henry David Thoreau said in Walden “Our village life would stagnate were it not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it.” People in industrial estates produce objects whereas people in Hopwas produce myths and news stories, a sort of Hopwas legend estate! A couple of months back Hopwas was back in the local Tamworth Herald news. The front page stories in January 2011 ran for a couple of weeks on evidence unearthed of occult activities found in the form of engraved copper tablets and Egyptian style statues. The first reaction from the scientific, rational community is usually one of dismissing it out of hand, sometimes angrily calling them wild stories, children’s pranks to sell newspapers. Another reaction is to ridicule and belittle the stories and people, with the resulting bitchiness on both sides. Take a look at the heated exchange on comments of the online Tamworth Herald article titled ‘Mysterious artefact baffles ghost hunters exploring ancient woods’ for example. I think though it´s more interesting than that.

Hopwas Hayes as one of the most ancient woodlands in the area, together with being on a prominent hill, is a prime locale for ‘goings on’. It’s literally an island of wildness surrounded by thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people in a largely urban and productive agricultural region. Woodlands once played an important economic role in the landscape; they provided fuel, building material, charcoal, hunting areas. Now it’s an anomaly, leading to questions like: ‘what is it exactly?’ ‘Where does it fit in the modern world?’ ‘Even the army don’t use it anymore?’ ‘Is it just a place for walking the dog or is it more than that?’

It is a non-productive space, there’s no museums, woodland trust initiatives, it’s truly a wild place. Maybe even an affront, insult or even a frightening unproductive space to some people, but to others could be the ideal place to act out those different non-conventional parts of their lives from new age beliefs to tree hugging!
Myth becomes reality, reality becomes Myth
My effort to describe the full circle story of the occult and Hopwas below:

Prominent point, ancient woods, thought of as source of energy = pagan practitioners attracted and start performing in woods = witches are caught by local police = local media frenzy = gets lodged in local consciousness = ‘mysterious wood’ becomes more mysterious = attracts: pagan practitioners, kids messing about, stories, ravers, writers = some people as result may avoid ‘scary wood’ = current day news story, occult objects are found, firm solid ‘archaeological type’ evidence is found, Staffordshire hoard style.

The process has produced the situation today, a highly charged place full of rumours, attracting and likely to attract certain people from far and wide.

This is all good
This is not a bad thing though this means the wood has become a fascinating place full of meaning for an increasing number of people. Stories of the occult are extremely attractive: they help sell a lot of books, films and as the Tamworth Herald has found out, newspapers. However they also help enquiring minds, in other words people want to find out more. People want to know more about this mysterious place and in doing so they’ll add stories to the place. Also there will be people who want to debunk these mysteries by trying to prove them wrong and providing the evidence for the history of Hopwas, hence getting to know the history of Hopwas better. Others like me will try to use interest in the strange happenings of Hopwas as a launch pad for my discoveries, encouraging exploration of the area. Others like the West Midlands Ghost club have their own research agenda and will keep adding mystery to the place. Witches and non-witches alike will keep dancing.

This is all good; this means Hopwas woods becomes alive with enquiry, exploration for all sorts of people with different approaches and views. This is not something to be scared of, there’s enough for everyone, what we should be scared of are these places remaining ignored. By being ignored it could be condemned. The historic Woodhouse in the centre of the woods was a victim of being ignored and ended up being demolished. By being ignored, by not being talked about, and leaving it in the hands of a few, the council, English Heritage, Tarmac, whoever, a lot has been lost over the years and a singular view of history encouraged. History isn’t all country houses, castles and churches. Hopwas has a chance to show that the history of a place told by different people, approaches, and views is a more relevant and ultimately fascinating history.

Booklet Funded by:

Staffordshire County Council