

Heswall Dales Western Lowland Heath Wirral Parks, Coast and Countryside

Heswall Dales



Heswall Dales is an area of some 72 acres of lowland heath situated close to Heswall on the Wirral Peninsula, England. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Local Nature Reserve. Heswall Dales has beautiful panoramic views across the River Dee, and has interesting walks and pathways, the sights and smells (with scents described as, vanilla, biscuity or coconuty) are unique to the Western Lowland Heath community. The heathland was designated SSSI in 1979 and is one of the best remaining example of lowland heath in Merseyside. The Dales', as they are known locally, were originally areas of common heathland used for grazing. The soil is acidic and relatively poor in terms of nutrients hence the vegetation of heather, gorse, mosses and particular types of grasses which can thrive where other plants cannot. It owes its existence to the underlying Triassic sandstone which was exposed in the last Ice Age twelve thousand years ago.

Underlying the Heath is a series of geologically interesting, windblown Triassic desert sandstone formations. The area is home to specialist lizard, butterfly, and invertebrate species including the Southern Hawker Dragonfly, this site is a haven for nature lovers and those looking to escape from the hustle and bustle of local towns for an afternoon stroll.



The dominant plant of the heathland is Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) drier areas of heath contain an assemblage of Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*), Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Western Gorse (*Ulex gallii*) this latter species has as its name suggests a distinct western distribution in Britain and is of regional significance. The mosaic of Birch scrub and European Gorse is an important habitat for breeding birds.



Unfortunately, by 1997 Britain had lost 60% or 580sq km of Lowland Heath, mainly to building and agriculture but also to natural succession. Traditionally the community of plants found on a lowland heath had a myriad of uses including thatching, beer and wine making, bedding for livestock, pig forage, soap manufacture, glass manufacture and fertiliser, food and fuel and production of much sought after heather honey.

Heswall including the area which is now Heswall Dales is an old settlement and has been cited as a possible location of Dingsmere, mentioned with regard to the battle of Brunanburh, in Egil's saga (tbc). Dingsmere was a destination for the escaping Scandinavian forces. Heswall was recorded in the Domesday book in 1086 as Eswelle and was owned by Robert de Rodelent. In 1277 the ownership passed to Patrick de Haselwall, who was Sheriff of Cheshire.

Southern Hawker Dragonfly (*Aeshna cyanea*)

The southern Hawker is a large and inquisitive Dragonfly often seen well away from water hunting (hawking) for insect prey along woodland fringes. The males are often seen and heard flying close to the surface of water and around marginal vegetation searching for a mate during breeding times. Coupling takes up to two hours after which the female *oviposits* (deposits into a stem or leaf using a specially designed organ) into floating or emergent vegetation. The wings are often kept moving and can be very noisy.

The male and female are quite easy to tell apart if they stay still long enough for you to take a good look. The male shown here has a black segmented abdomen covered in paired almost triangular spots on segments turning from Apple green by the Thorax to deep blue by the end. The eyes are blue and legs appear mostly black. The wings are clear but yellow with age and they have short rectangular black spots (*pterostigma*). The female is very similar in shape but has a browner body/abdomen with apple green spots. The wing spots are present and are brown rather than black.



The Southern Hawker is usually seen June to October, and the Dales is one of the best places on the Wirral to see them.

