

# Buried Bouskell Self-Guided Circular Walk

Welcome to Bouskell Park. I'm Mathew Morris from University of Leicester Archaeological Services and I'm the lead archaeologist for Blaby District Council's Buried Bouskell project. This project is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and will restore the park's historic icehouse and give local volunteers and schools a chance to take part in an archaeological dig which will explore more of the park's history. On this self-guided circular walk, I will take you around the park and tell you what we known so far about its history and archaeology.

**Cross the footbridge from the car park into the park.**

## 1. A Victorian Pleasure Ground

The footbridge crosses an unnamed tributary stream of the River Sense, which rises near Countesthorpe about a mile south of the park and flows north through Blaby into the River Sense near Glen Parva.

The park was bought by Blaby District Council from the Bouskells, a family of prominent Leicester solicitors, in the 1990s as recreational space for the village of Blaby. The landscape you see today, however, is much older and shows use of the area dating back at least 800 years.

The parkland was once the private pleasure ground for Blaby Hall, which can be seen through the trees to the north of the park, and it still retains much of its original Victorian character. The pleasure ground was the work of John Clarke who demolished the 'old hall', an early 18th-century building, in 1837 and built the Jacobean style house you can see today. Clarke set his new mansion within expansive landscaped grounds. Formal gardens were laid out close to the hall and to the south (Bouskell Park today) was enclosed parkland incorporating tree plantations, a fishpond, an icehouse and a linear woodland walk (the Long Walk) which projected into the farmland to the east of the park.

*Top Right: The Victorian landscape is clear visible on this 1st edition 25" Ordnance Survey map published in 1886. Image: Ordnance Survey / National Library of Scotland.*

*Bottom Right: Blaby Hall today. Image: APB (Leicester) LLP.c*

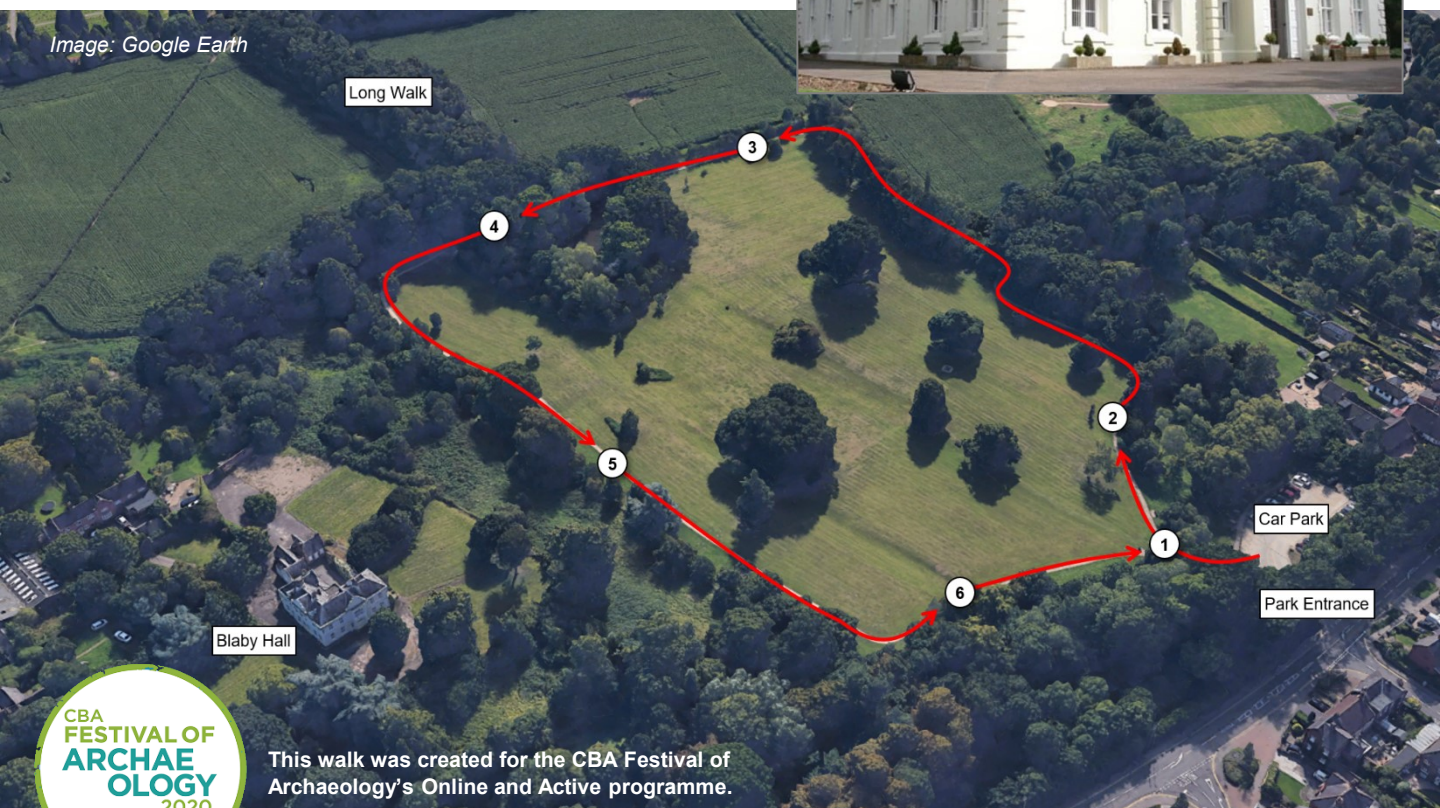
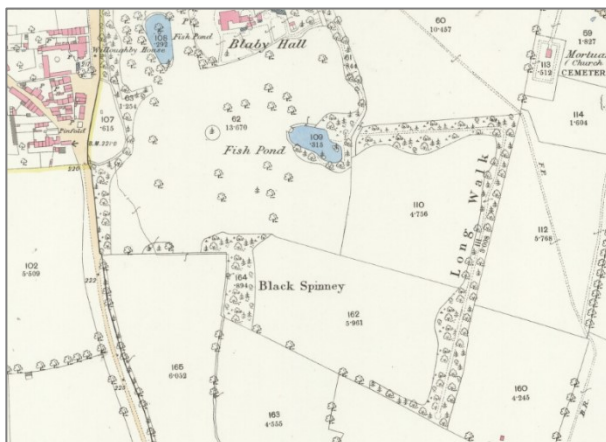
*Image: Google Earth*

**Location:** Bouskell Park, Welford Road, Blaby LE18 4FT

**Walk length:** 0.5 miles / 0.8 km

**Gradient:** Level and moderate, gravel path

**Parking:** Yes, car park accessed from Welford Road





***When the path forks, follow the path to the right.***

## 2. A lost medieval village?

Today, the park has many prominent 'lumps' and 'bumps' which are thought to be a deserted part of the medieval village of Blaby and the site of the medieval manor house. These were reputedly demolished in the 17th or 18th century to make way for the parkland surrounding the Hall.

Archaeological observations in 1997 when this path was being installed found 13th-century pottery and ironworking slag as well as fragments of cobbled surface and a stone wall. The earthworks are clearly visible as you walk around the park but are difficult to understand when looked at from the ground. When we look at them from above, however, we can clearly see that they form rectangular platforms or enclosures, perhaps some of the tofts (homesteads) and crofts (plots of land attached to homesteads) of the medieval village.

Or are they? At the moment we don't know this for sure and one of the aims of the forthcoming community archaeology work in the park will be to dig test-pits into the earthworks to try and find out more about them.

***Continue along the path as it heads east.***

## 3. The medieval open field

As you reach the east end of the park look carefully at the earthworks. You might be able to see that they form parallel lines. This is the remains of ridge and furrow, created by a system of single-sided ploughing used in Europe in the medieval period. Repeated ploughing would pile earth up into a series of ridges separated by shallow furrows. It marks the beginning of the Mill Field, the open field to the east of the village.

***Continue along the path as it turns north.***

## 4. The Icehouse

Hidden in the trees next to the large fishpond is the icehouse. Built in 1843, it is a domed circular brick structure with an arched entrance tunnel buried beneath a clay mound next to the fishpond. It is a fine example of a structure which was once common in the grounds of most country houses from around 1600 until the introduction of mechanical refrigeration systems in the early 20th century.

The interior is nearly 3m in diameter and 3m high. In the winter, servants from the hall would cut ice from the pond and load it into the icehouse through a hole in the top of the dome. Straw would be used both to add additional insulation and to prevent the ice from forming a single large block. The stored ice would then be taken out through the 2m long tunnel on the north-east side of the mound, as needed, to the kitchens to keep perishable foodstuffs cool.

Iced dishes at formal dinners and parties helped demonstrate the owner of Blaby Hall's status and wealth and a properly maintained icehouse would be capable of storing ice throughout the year. Despite their utilitarian function icehouses were prized structures within the garden landscape and their earth-covered mounds were often clearly visible within the garden. This is the case here, where the icehouse was plainly visible from the hall and visitors would have passed close by as they strolled through the park to the Long Walk.

With the advent of refrigerators, which could be installed directly into the kitchen, icehouses became redundant and fell into decay. At Blaby, the original structure still survives very well. Its entrance was partially restored in the 1990s. Now, it is undergoing further restoration to ensure its long-term preservation.

*Right: The icehouse in the 1990s before its entrance was restored (top), in 2008 (middle) and during the 2020 restoration (bottom). Images: Blaby District Council, Pat Dalton & ULAS.*



*Above: This is a digital terrain model of the park generated using LiDAR, an airborne survey method which uses a laser to map the ground surface. The image has been processed to remove buildings and vegetation and reveal the shape of the ground beneath. The resulting model clearly shows the many earthworks in the park. Image: ULAS / Environment Agency / Ordnance Survey.*





***When you reach the Icehouse, if you want to extend your walk you can divert onto the permissive path along the Victorian 'Long Walk', an atmospheric woodland walk, otherwise continue along the path.***

## 5. The manor of Blaby

Through the trees to the right is Blaby Hall, traditionally the home of the lord of the manor but now converted to offices. Blaby, spelt *Bladi* in 1086, comes from *Blábýr*, a Scandinavian placename meaning 'Blár's farmstead'. Names ending in -by are very common in Leicestershire and indicate settlements established after the Vikings conquered parts of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia in the late 9th century AD, in an area which came to be known as the Danelaw.

Following the Norman Conquest in 1066, Blaby's Anglo-Scandinavian lords, Brictrmer and Ulf, were ousted and William I granted the manor to one of his closest followers Robert, Count of Meulan, who became the first earl of Leicester in 1107. The village in the late 11th century had 37 households (about 150-200 people altogether). Land in the Sence Valley to the north of the village was meadow whilst on the higher ground to the south were open arable fields. There was also a watermill, probably on the site of the present Blaby Mill to the east of the village.

In the 12th century, the earls of Leicester granted Blaby to the Lodbrookes, who from the 13th century onwards styled themselves 'de Blaby'. In 1534, the manor passed through marriage to the Savilles and in the late 17th or early 18th century George Saville sold the manor to the Ashby family, who in turn sold it to Thomas Major in 1760.

In 1766 the open fields in the parish were enclosed. The records for this event gives us an amazing window into what the village was like in the mid-18th century, as it began to grow from a small farming community into an industrial settlement (by 1846 the village had 1,150 inhabitants, many employed as framework knitters).

The enclosure map gives a clear indication that the earthworks in the park pre-date the Victorian pleasure ground, but how old are they? Are they ancient fields, or are they relics of medieval tofts and crofts (see Stop 2 above)? These are questions we hope to answer during our community dig on 17-18 April 2021!

***Continue along the path back towards the car park.***

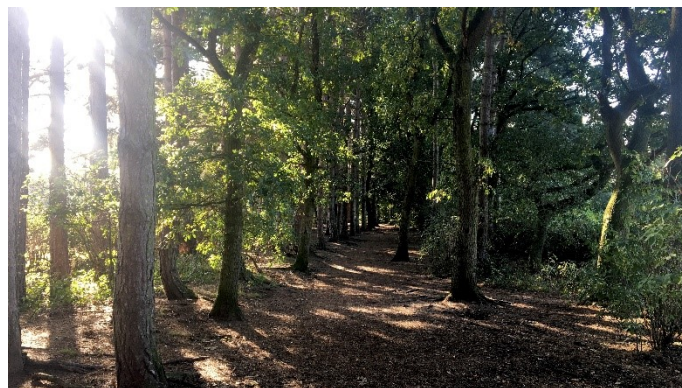
## 6. The hollow way

As you walk back to the car park you will again see the many earth platforms and enclosures to your left, including a long straight hollow heading from the stream into the park. This is a hollow way, a trackway which has sunk into the ground. This is because carts using it for hundreds of years have eroded the ground away. To the west, the trackway probably forded the stream and connected with the road giving the village access to the open fields. To the east it joins a second hollow way which heads north towards the Hall.

Bouskell Park is a fascinating palimpsest which preserves over 800 years of changing rural landscape, from medieval village and field to country house garden and landscaped park, and further study will provide new insights into what life was like in Blaby in the past.

I hope you have enjoyed your walk. If you would like to know more about the Project and how to take part, please visit the website below.

*Right: The hollow way and other earthworks in the park. Superimposed on top of this earlier landscape are the tree plantations of the Victorian park. Image: ULAS*



### The Long Walk

East of the Park, a permissive path allows you to walk along the 500m 'Long Walk', an L-shaped tree belt which was once part of the designed landscape enclosing Blaby Hall. The walk is first shown on the 1886 Ordnance Survey map (see page 1) and was probably laid out in the mid-19th century when the park was created. The current woodland planting reflects the mixed planting shown on the map. Treescaped walks like this were popular in 18th- and 19th-century parks and gardens and this Walk was designed to create a pleasing prospect of the wider agricultural landscape beyond the park.



Above: The 1766 enclosure map shows Blaby Hall before the hall was rebuilt and the parkland created in the mid-19th century. The complex of buildings south of the Church of All Saints includes the 'old' Blaby Hall (left) and Blaby Hall Farm (right). Land to the south of the hall is owned by Thomas Major and is shown divided into a series of rectangular enclosures which match the layout of the earthworks in the park today. Image: Leicestershire Record Office.

