

West Berkshire Countryside Society

West Berkshire Countryside Society was formed in January 2012 to provide an umbrella group for four long-established environmental groups. These were *The Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys, The Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group, The Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers* and *The Pang Valley Barn Owl Group*.

Our remit is to continue their work of promoting and improving the landscape of West Berkshire by practical conservation work and by introducing people to the countryside, its work, history and wildlife, through the medium of talks and conducted walks – of which this is one.

Members of **West Berkshire Countryside Society** currently pay a £15 annual subscription for individual and family membership to provide a financial resource. Those members who wish to, make up volunteer working parties to undertake practical conservation tasks.

Non-members are very welcome to join our tasks and our conducted walks for which we make no charge. Non-members are also welcome at our talks for which we make a small charge.

If you would like more information about our activities or would like to join us and help with our work, please visit our website:

www.westberkscountryside.org.uk



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

‘TURNPIKE & TANK TRAPS’ THE BOTTOM END

A walk around the lower Pang Valley. Starting and finishing at Pangbourne

About 3½ miles or 6 km.

**Ordnance Survey Explorer Map
159 – ‘Reading’ will be useful**

There is a modest hill on this walk and surfaces can be uneven and muddy. There are also two crossings of a busy road and a length of road walking along Sulham Lane (usually quiet).

References and Further Reading

<i>Victoria County History – Berkshire</i> <i>The Concise Dictionary of English Placenames</i> . OUP. Council for British Archaeology ‘20 th Century Defences in Britain’. 2002 Wills H <i>Pillboxes. A Study of UK Defences</i> 1940. Robert Stone <i>Miller of Pangbourne</i> 1980	Williamson T <i>Shaping Medieval Landscapes</i> Mabey R <i>Flora Britannica</i> 1997 London Phillips D <i>The Great Road to Bath</i> 1983 Taylor C <i>Roads & Tracks of Britain</i> 1982 Purseglove J <i>Taming the Flood</i> 1989 Wilcox J <i>Pangbourne An illustrated history</i> 1992 West Berks Council Historical Environment Record.
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Medieval Land Reclamation.

The drainage of wetlands has a long history in this country. The Romans were experts and had carried out major schemes all over their empire. The emperor Hadrian, as well as building The Wall to mark the frontier of Roman Britain, also built the Car Dyke in East Anglia. This is nearly 90 miles (144km) long and runs along the west edge of the fens. Land reclamation is expensive and only major landowners had the necessary capital. The most enthusiastic drainers were the religious orders who had the funds and the continuity of management required to carry through major schemes. I suspect that Reading Abbey drained the marshes around Tidmarsh soon after they acquired the manor in the 12th century. The grid of wide ditches and the raising of the river banks would be their work. Nevertheless, the Moors were still known as 'The common marsh of Pangborne' in 1634 and are shown as 'a Common' in 1761. Wet meadows were very valuable because they provided the hay needed to keep the livestock, particularly the plough oxen, alive during the winter and rents were therefore much higher.

Turnpike Roads.

Medieval roads were atrocious. Some Roman Roads still survived and were used but most roads were muddy tracks. A law passed in 1555 put the responsibility for road maintenance on parishes that were required to elect a Surveyor of the Highways. Everyone in the parish was required to provide four consecutive days labour (later six days) without pay to repair the roads. This Statute Labour was bitterly resented, done half-heartedly and avoided whenever possible. County Councils took over main roads in 1889 and local roads in 1894. The 18th century demand for improved transport resulted in the creation of Turnpike Trusts who undertook to build and maintain certain roads in return for the tolls. There was furious resistance from many different lobbies, even to the extent of attacking and burning the gates. Part of the Great North Road was the first to be turnpiked in 1663 and the Bath Road followed in 1706.

World War II Defences.

In 1940, when invasion by the Nazi army seemed very likely, a number of anti-tank defence lines were created around London. The Nazis had used fast moving groups of tanks very effectively in Poland and France and these defence lines were designed to halt them. *G HQ LINE RED* consisted of a ditch running from Theale to Pangbourne (see map) covered by gun positions each containing a two pounder anti-tank gun supported by Bren machine guns. The Nazi army had captured many 2lb guns at Dunkirk and it was well known that enemy armour was proof against the 2lb gun but there was no time to re-tool the factories to replace them with the effective 5lb gun. Luckily the defences were not needed.



Pangbourne and Tidmarsh in 1761



Freshly pollarded willows in 2004

26. Saltney Mead. This was once Common to Whitchurch, Sulham and Purley and would have been an important source of hay and of grazing. Detached commons like this frequently provided a resource – hay, firewood etc – for parishes lacking them that were often some distance away.

Pollard willows. Willows were cut off at about 8 feet above the ground so that the re-growth was out of reach of cattle and horses. This allowed the area to be grazed. Compare the photograph above, taken in March 2004 with the present growth. Pollarding extends the life of the tree almost indefinitely. If it is not regularly carried out the branches become too heavy and split the trunk and the tree dies. There was a steady demand for willow from thatchers and hurdle makers. Thin strips of willow were even woven into

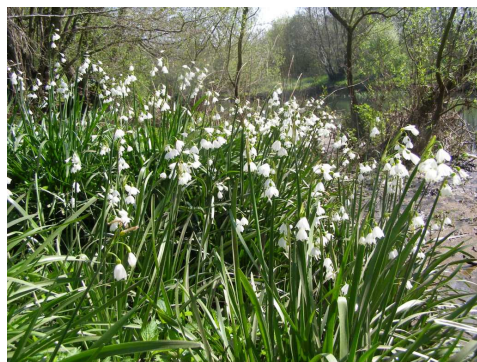
hats. An old willow is second only to an ancient pollard oak in the number of different habitats it can maintain for creatures from the smallest invertebrate to mammals and birds.

27. Pangbourne Meadow. During both Word Wars troops were trained in building pontoon bridges here. It is now owned by Pangbourne Parish Council and its extension to the south is owned by the National Trust.

28. The Thames Path. Originally for horses and men towing barges. The men were called 'scufflehunters' from the noise their feet made as they hauled the heavy barges. The path is now a National Long Distance Trail. It runs from Thames Head near Cirencester to The Thames Barrier at Woolwich.

29. Whitchurch Bridge. Built in timber in 1792 to re-place a ferry and re-built in 1840. The steel bridge was built in 1901 and last renovated between 2014 and 2015.

10. The medieval road. This insignificant path is all that remains of the original Pangbourne Road. Look out for Loddon Lilies in spring.



Loddon Lilies Environment Agency

11. Tidmarsh. Means 'Tudda's Marsh'. The manor is first mentioned in 1239. It had a vineyard and the 'rent' was the provision of a knight to guard Wallingford Castle for 40 days in time of war.

12. Houses. The ornate cottages were built for the Tidmarsh Estate in about 1830. The first one was a Sunday School.

13. The Toll House. This octagonal house was built in the late 18th century to serve the Turnpike Road from Wallingford to Basingstoke. It seems that only the length from Pangbourne to the Great Bath Road at Theale was actually built. In 1832 it collected £83 in tolls.

14. 'The Greyhound'. Probably dates from the 16th century but there has been an inn on the site for much longer.

15. Mill House. Lytton Strachey, a biographer and member of the infamous early 20th century Bloomsbury set, lived here between 1917 and 1924 with the artist Dora Carrington and Ralph Partridge causing a local scandal!

Tidmarsh Mill. A mill is mentioned in 1239. As power driven mills took away business the Stone family fitted extra machinery in an attempt to compete. When it was started up all the windows fell out!

Milling ceased in 1937. The green box and solar panel monitor river levels for the Environment Agency.

16. World War II 'Stop Line'.

See Page 1.

17. Oaklands Farm. Is built on an island in the flood plain and is part of the causeway.

18. Alder coppice. Note the massive 'stools' formed by repeated cutting.

19. Peatpits Wood & Sulham Brook. 'Peatpits' probably indicates peat cutting for fuel, although peat was also burned to make potash. The Sulham Brook was part of the drainage system. See Note 7.

20. Open hall house. The west end was probably built in the 14th/15th C. with a fire on the floor of a hall open to the roof. The chimney was added later and a floor inserted in the hall.

21. Sulham. The name means 'the farm in a narrow valley'. It is mentioned in Domesday Book and in 1322 had a watermill – probably on the site of the modern mill at Home Farm.

22. Sulham Wood. This ancient beech wood covers a series of very large terraces. Recent research has shown that the terraces are part of a carriage drive from Purley Hall along which the owners and their visitors could be driven to admire the view across the Sulham Gap. The dense dog's mercury on the downhill side shows that the area was cleared to reveal the view. The pits along the uphill edge were dug to provide chalk to lime the fields.

23. Wet Woodland. This small wood is a SSSI. It is important for its range of wet woodland species.

24. Flood Relief Scheme. This was built by the Environment Agency to store flood water to protect the area around Pangbourne School and Kennedy Drive.

25. Railway. Looking at the brickwork in the arch you can see the original Brunel bridge and the later extension.



Tidmarsh Sunday School



Turnpike milestone



Type 28A (modified) pill box



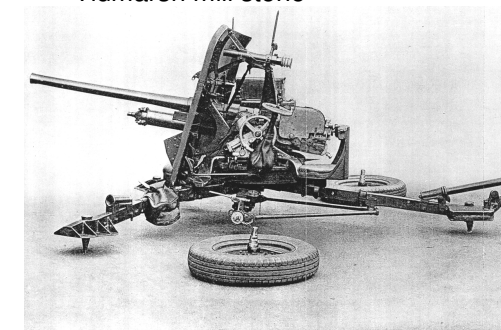
Alder coppice stools



Turnpike Toll House



Tidmarsh mill stone



Two pounder anti-tank gun



Early house on Sulham Lane

1. Pangbourne Village. There were Roman and Saxon settlements at Pangbourne and Domesday Book (1086) records two manors and two mills. One of these may have been near the confluence with the Thames.

2. Working Men's Club. Founded in the 1890's with premises near the station, the Club bought 'Roselea' in 1900. The house dates from the early 19th century. The Club almost lost the premises when their mortgage was called in but were saved by a Pangbourne businessman (Mr A Petrocokino) who paid off the mortgage and presented the house to the club.

3. The Railway. Isambard Brunel built the Great Western Railway. It opened to Reading on 30 March 1840 and had passed Pangbourne by July 1840. It was initially Broad Gauge. Note the two phases of building in the bridge.

4. The School. Now 'Garlands' and 'Costa'. The 'Breedon School' was established in 1684 by the will of John Breedon of Bere Court as a charity school for 12 boys – 'particularly those of the poorer sort.' It continued until 1900 when a school was built on Pangbourne Hill. In 1890 there was fierce opposition to the vicar and the school master who were refusing to accept boys who had not been baptised.

5. Pangbourne Mill. Probably on the same site as one of the Domesday mills, this had two waterwheels and four pairs of millstones. A mill was a very valuable asset to a Lord of a Manor since his tenants were required to use it and could not grind their corn outside the manor. It was tenanted and later owned by the Stone family from 1871. A water pumping station was built on part of the site in 1929.

6. Perched river banks. These banks have been deliberately raised to allow the water level upstream of the mill to be maintained at a higher level than normal. This provided more power to the mill and allowed it to grind for longer.

7. The Sulham Gap. The Pang Valley between the Theale and the Thames is known as the Sulham Gap. Originally the Kennet and the Pang flowed through the Gap to join the Thames at Pangbourne. The great volumes of water cut out a wide flood plain and deposited gravel terraces on either side. The Moors are in the floodplain and the villages are on the terraces. Land heave around Theale about 10,000 years ago – probably caused by permafrost melt – diverted the Kennet to its present route and left the gap as a swamp known as 'Tudda's Marsh' and crossed by a causeway to Sulham. Reading Abbey received the area when it was founded in 1121 and drained it to make very valuable grazing and hay meadows. The Pang and Sulham Brook were embanked and led down the west and east sides respectively with a joining grid of channels. Watermills were inserted at Tidmarsh and Sulham Home Farm. The marshy area at Theale was probably crossed by a board walk because Theale means 'planks'!

8. Alder Copse. Alders were a valuable crop and could be grown on land too wet to use for anything else. Here ditches have been dug to maintain the wetness. Alder was coppiced – cut off at ground level – and the poles were used, amongst other things, for scaffolding and clog soles and high quality gunpowder was made from its charcoal. Because it resists rot when kept wet it was used for reinforcing river banks and underwater work.

9. Riverside fence. This keeps grazing animals away from the river edge and prevents them kicking mud into the water. Layers of silt can kill the creatures which rely on clean gravel for habitats and for spawning areas.

