

## 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*, *Kenner & 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 improving and promoting 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](http://www.westberkscountryside.org.uk)

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## ‘BEYOND THE GREAT M4’

**A walk to explore the Countryside north of Theale.  
Starting and finishing at  
the M4 footbridge**

**About 4½ miles or 7 km.**

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

There are no hills on this walk and surfaces are generally sound but can be uneven and muddy in the Hogmoor area. There is a short length of road walking along the busy Theale – Tidmarsh road, but there is a grass verge. Great care should be taken on this stretch.

**The Sulham Gap** is very interesting geologically and historically. The River Kennet originally flowed through the Gap and entered the Thames near Pangbourne, then – between 15,000 and 20,000 years ago the land rose slightly and caused the Kennet to shift to its present course through the Coley Gap and into the Thames at Reading. The rise need only have been very small – the gradients even now between Theale and Pangbourne and Theale and Reading are very small. As a result of the shift the Sulham Gap was left to the tiny River Pang and became a swampy maze of winding channels. In 1121 it was called ‘*Tedmerse*’ meaning ‘*Tyddas Marsh*’. Suham means ‘*farm in a narrow valley*’ if you stand on the hillside at the north end of Sulham Woods you will see how appropriate this is. The area was given to Reading Abbey soon after its foundation in 1121 and my personal theory is that they drained the whole marsh and turned it into rich hay meadows and grazing land. We will see some of their wide drainage channels at the northern end of the walk. They seem to have straightened the Pang to run down the western edge of the Gap and the Sulham Brook to run down the eastern side. They embanked the Pang to drive watermills at Tidmarsh and Pangbourne and the Sulham Brook to power one at Sulham Home Farm.

**The Great Road to the West.** When thinking about ancient roads and routeways one has to remember the users and the methods of transport available to them. Herds and flocks need water, early carts pulled by horses cannot easily climb steep gradients. Early roads tended to follow river valleys whenever possible. This explains the route of ‘The Old Bath Road’, the road from London to the West Country and one of the most important roads in ancient times. It follows the Thames Valley as far as Maidenhead and then swings west to Reading and up the Kennet Valley through Hungerford and over the dry downs to the west. Later the railways, which also dislike gradients, followed the same route. In early times it would have been a wide ill defined swathe of tracks, each used in turn as they were ploughed up by hooves and wheels and became impassable. Remember ‘Slough’ means ‘swamp’!

**Turnpikes.** Early writers regularly report that medieval roads were atrocious – particularly in winter and wet weather. Some Roman Roads still survived and were used but most roads were muddy tracks. William Cobbett writing in the 1830’s often describes riding along roads with mud up to his horse’s belly.

A law passed in 1555 put the responsibility for road maintenance on parishes. Every male in the parish was required to provide four consecutive days labour (later six days) without pay to repair the roads. This was bitterly resented, the work was done half-heartedly and avoided whenever possible.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century demand for improved transport resulted in the creation of Turnpike Trusts which 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. A turnpike road from Pangbourne to the Bath Road was built in the late 1700s with a toll house at Tidmarsh.

The most obvious signs of a turnpike road are long straight stretches of road with identical milestones and occasional toll houses. Toll houses usually stand immediately at the roadside and are often decoratively built.

County Councils took over the construction and maintenance of main roads in 1889 and of local roads in 1894. On this walk we will see three generations of road history.

**10. Highway History.** At this point you can see a medieval road (Points 12), the 18<sup>th</sup> century turnpike that replaced it, the modern road that replaced that in its turn and a motorway. There is more about turnpikes on page one. In the late 1700s this turnpike replaced the winding medieval road between Theale and Pangbourne. The octagonal house in Tidmarsh was the toll-house. In 1832 the tolls amounted to £83.



The Turnpike Toll House.

**11. Stock watering ponds.** When the turnpike was built it cut off animals grazing in these fields from using the river for drinking and so ponds had to be provided. Therefore these very ordinary looking ponds must be over 200 years old.

**12. The medieval road** extends to the north and south of the motorway. It is hard to realise that this narrow lane was once the main road from Theale to Pangbourne! North of Tidmarsh it is even narrower!

**13. North Street.** Is aptly named and is probably quite an ancient settlement and contains some interesting houses.



In Old English *straet* usually means a Roman Road. Perhaps this was part of the minor road network of Roman times or perhaps it was simply a metalled track like a Roman Road.

**14. Theale.** The place name simply means *planks* in Old English! It is first recorded as *thela* in 1176 but there was probably a settlement here before that. The road west from Reading was forced to cross the marsh area where the Kennet had once swung north to join the Thames at Pangbourne. The wet area along the Kennet lay to the south and the marshy Sulham Gap lay to the north. Even today the only east-west road is a former causeway between Sulham and Tidmarsh. So perhaps the ‘planks’ were part of a bridge or even part of a causeway of the type found in the marshes of the Somerset Levels made of stakes, planks and wattle hurdles.

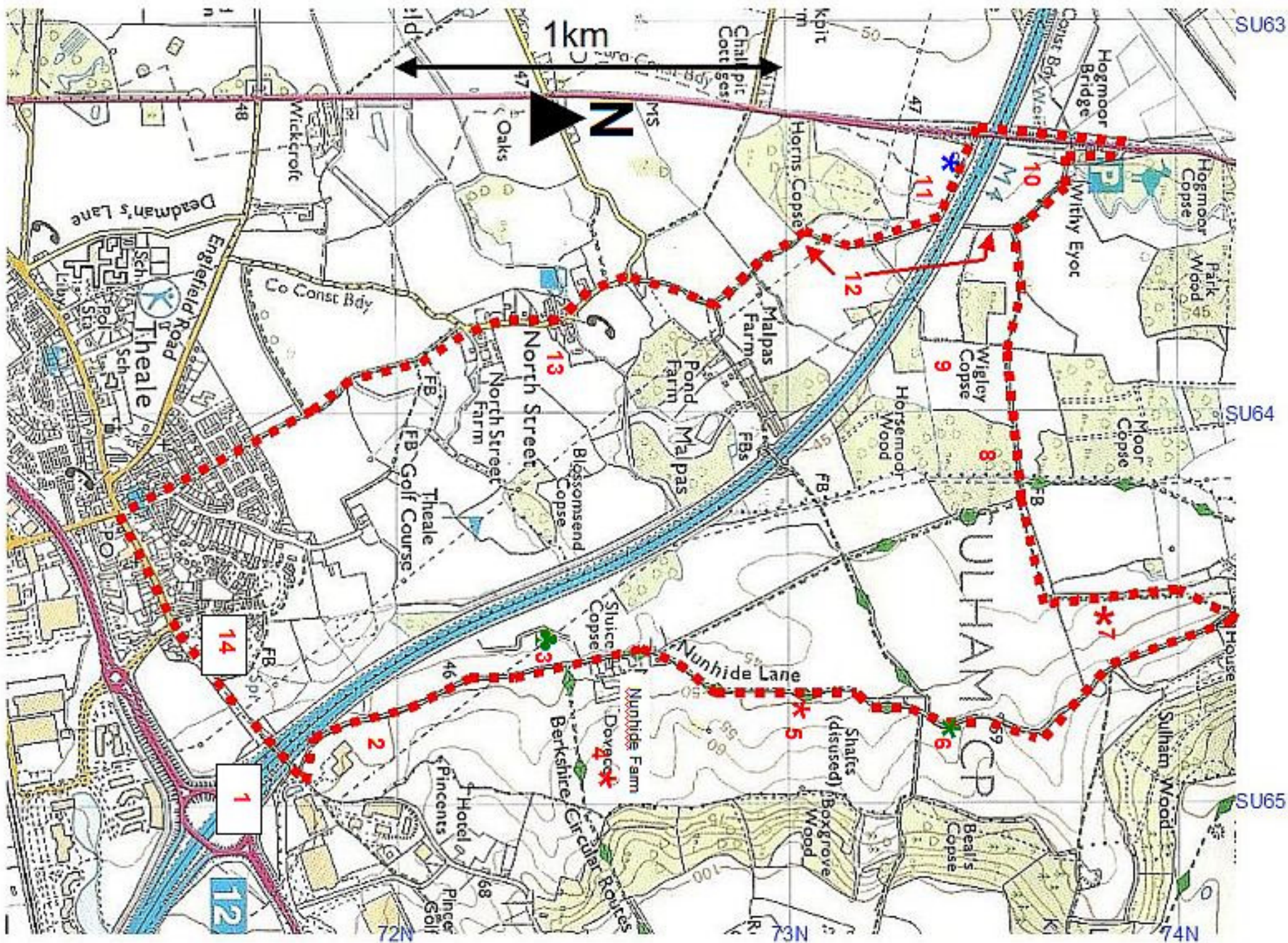
Once the road and the village became the Old Bath Road and traffic increased then facilities for travellers were built. The ‘Falcon’ is an example where you can still see the wide archway that led the coaches into the stable yard.



The Falcon

The main fabric of the inn is 17<sup>th</sup> century but it was ‘modernised’ with a brick front in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.







**1. The M4 Motorway** was first proposed in the 1930s but not firmly planned until 1956. The first phase between London and the A4 west of Maidenhead opened in 1965 and the length past Theale on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1971. The builders said it wasn't ready but the Transport Minister wanted it open for the Christmas holiday!

**2. Surviving old landscape.** In spite of the years of upheaval caused by building roads, houses and warehouses some of the old landscape survives. Look in the hedges along Nunhide Lane and you will see woodland species such as dog's mercury, old ash, hazel and field maple coppice stools.

**3. Ancient oak pollard.** This splendid English oak pollard has a girth of 6.61 metres and is probably well over 500 years old. Imagine the landscape of its youth when Henry VIII was a lad!

**4. Nunhide Farm & dovecote.** There has probably been a farm on this site for a thousand years. The name is Old English and either means *Household of nuns* ie. a nunnery, or *Nunna's homestead*. The tower is a dovecote built in the late 1700s. A (dubious) local legend has it being built by a Sulham vicar at a point where both he and his fiancée could see it.

**5. Pill Box.** During World War 2 the rivers were fortified as obstacles to prevent enemy tanks reaching London. A wide ditch was dug between the Thames at Pangbourne and the Kennet complex at Theale Mill. This was called *Stop Line GHQ Red* and it was lined with concrete gun positions and smaller support pillboxes armed with machineguns like this one. (See also Point 7). The ditch was back-filled after the war but traces of it can still be seen as it cuts across the regular grid of drainage channels.

**6. Badger sett.** Badgers love chalky areas. Their immensely strong front legs and claws can dig out solid chalk – look for claw marks – and their tunnels stay dry in the worst weather. Earthworms are their main food and they make beds of dry

grass that they harvest and drag to their sett. They change their beds often. You can see the old bedding in the entrance.

**7. Type 22A Pillbox.** There are many like this along the stop line. They were intended to house a 2 pounder anti-tank gun. The Nazis had captured many of these guns at Dunkirk and had designed their tank armour to be impervious to their shells! Fortunately the pillboxes never had to be used. The Kennet and Kennet and Avon Canal were similarly fortified as *Stop Line GHQ Blue* and many pillboxes still exist.

**8. Alder coppice.** Although not highly rated by modern foresters the alder was a very valuable tree. It grew quickly on land too wet for other uses. When cut off near the base it produced crops of straight stems that when seasoned made light strong scaffold poles. Alder wood made clog soles, alder charcoal made good quality gunpowder and alder's rot resisting properties made it suitable for river bank piling. It also produced a useful dye.

**9. Drainage of the marsh.** As mentioned in the notes on Page 1, I believe that Reading Abbey drained the marsh soon after they were given the land. You can see the grid of drainage channels particularly clearly near Wigley Copse but they extend all the way from near Sulham to Pangbourne. The spoil seems to have been piled up on the 'islands' between the channels. These island are flower rich. One of them near Pangbourne is a SSSI.



Silverweed.

Poor people put the leaves in their shoes when they did not have socks. The leaves are pleasantly silky.



Oak pollard at Pont 3



Nunhide Tower Point 4



Small pillbox at Point 5



Badger sett with bedding Point 6



Type 22A Pill Box at Point 7



Marsh drainage channel at Point 9



Turnpike Bridge at Point 10



Medieval road at Point 12