

West Berkshire Countryside Society

West Berkshire Countryside Society was formed in January 2012 by merging 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 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

The Berkshire Geoconservation Group

The Berkshire Geoconservation Group are a volunteer group which aims to work with local authorities, landowners and the general public to safeguard our special landscape for future generations and to promote understanding of its geology and geodiversity.

We designate sites of significance within the county so that these can be conserved and enhanced where appropriate.

Over the year we have a regular programme of walks to areas of interest and anyone is most welcome to come along on these. We are always happy to give talks to local groups about the area.

For more information about the group and how you can become involved in conservation of sites or simply join our walks please contact Lesley Dunlop on **Website**

www.berksgoeconservation.org.uk

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West Berkshire
Countryside Society



WEST BERKSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE SOCIETY & BERKSHIRE GEOCONSERVATION GROUP

‘PITS AND HILLS’

A walk around the Woolhampton, Brimpton and Wasing countryside to look at the interaction between geology, wildlife and human history. Starting and finishing at Woolhampton.

About 7 miles or 11km.

Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 158 – ‘Newbury & Hungerford’ will be useful

There are two steep hills on this walk. Paths are generally sound but may be muddy and uneven. There are four unavoidable lengths of road walking and two stiles on Brimpton Common.

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General Geology

The bedrock in the area dates from the Palaeogene (formerly known as the Tertiary), about 55-50 million years ago. The gravel deposits are more recent and were deposited during the last 500,000 years. The London Clay Formation was deposited in marine conditions close to land and fossils indicate a warm subtropical climate with forested areas similar to present day East Africa or Indonesia. The London Clay consists of a stiff, bluish coloured clay which becomes brown when weathered. The clay itself has been used commercially for making bricks, tiles, and coarse pottery. It is infertile for gardens and crops. The sands further up the hill slope were laid down closer to the shoreline where there was more current action.

The gravels represent deposition during the Quaternary when Britain was subjected to periods of cold and warm. The oldest gravels are the ones at the top of the hill (Silchester) and the youngest nearest to the present river Kennet.

How the geology has affected the human history.

Early settlements in this area are generally on the high ground of the London Clay and the oldest gravel terraces. The river valleys were used for hunting and fishing. Later the peat deposits were dug and burned to make fertiliser. The resulting ponds grew osiers to make baskets. In more recent times the gravels have been extensively worked. Initially from the high river terraces but more recently, with the advent of good pumping systems, from the terraces nearest to the present day river which are below the current water table. Most of the worked out pits have now been allowed to fill with water and are becoming important wildlife areas.

A short history of the area.

Woolhampton is not a particularly early settlement. It is first mentioned in Domesday Book (1086) when it had a population of about 20 families and a mill. There were no woods. Before 1159 the manor was owned by the Knights Hospitallers and by 1291 there was a church. In 1304 there was a deer park. The Bath Road was made a turnpike in 1728, the Navigation came through in 1718-23 and was extended to become the Kennet and Avon Canal in 1810, and the railway joined this crowded strip of land in 1857. Woolhampton station was called 'Midgham' to avoid confusion with 'Wolverhampton' in Paddington announcements! An Enclosure Act of 1811 enclosed the land in the south over which we will walk. In the early 20th century the parish covered 719 acres of which 54 were arable, 483 permanent grassland and 47 acres of wood.

Brimpton is early. There are rumours of a Roman building near the church and a charter of King Eadmund issued in 944 uses Bronze Age barrows as one of its boundary marks. By 1086 it had two manors with a population of about 15 families at Brimpton and 10 at Shalford. Like Woolhampton no woodland was recorded. In 1198 Shalford was held by the Knights Hospitallers. The area suffered badly during the Black Death in 1348-9. On a neighbouring manor all the labourers died. This may have been the cause of the decline of the village at Shalford. A small settlement still existed in 1762 but had gone by 1873.

Wasing was held by Bernard the Falconer in 1086 and had a population of about seven families. Most of its Common Land was enclosed to make Wasing Park between 1634 and 1750.



World War 2 Pillbox at Point 1



Common reed along the pit at Point 2



Brimpton Church and 300 year old yew at Point 7



The River Enborne at Point 11



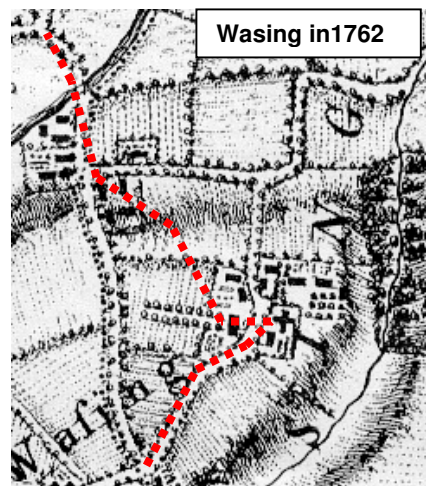
Wasing Chapel at Point 15

14. Brimpton Common. would have been an important part of local life from an early time. The 944 charter includes it within the Saxon estate that became Brimpton parish. Yardland holders were allowed to graze eight cows and 30 sheep. These were then penned on the arable land and their dung transferred fertility from the Common to the arable. There are nine barrows on the Common. They were excavated in 1880 and, as is usual with private collections even now, the finds were lost. **The geology** of the Common decided its function as it would have been unsuitable for crop growing due to its acid soils. It lies on some of the oldest gravels in the area, similar to Greenham Common. These gravels were deposited from braided streams draining from the north over a fairly flat eroded landscape about 450,000 years ago.

The Pineapple' pub would have served people working on the Common and travellers on the **Turnpike road**. This is the straight east – west road. Turnpikes were built by groups of business men in the 18th century and users paid tolls. A Toll House once stood on the corner. The Common was enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1815. The 19th century houses are typical of settlements along the edges of Commons.

15. Wasing. In 1762 the path along the edge of Wasing Wood is shown as a road. Look for the ancient yew near the south end. This could be 700 years old. Note the alder coppice in the valley. The park was once the common fields of the manor of Wasing. The original Wasing Place was built between 1770-73 and burnt out in 1945. The present house was built with the materials of the original.

The church of St Nicholas was originally built in the 13th century and ended at the bell tower. It was enlarged and rebuilt in 1761. Note the half timbered granary on saddles.



16. Spring. A survey of 1750 notes 10 acres with a hermitage, a spring and a churchyard. This valley is probably the spring and the hermitage was around the church. The 1762 map shows a building in an enclosure with the church. The point where the spring emerges is on the boundary between the gravels and other permeable strata on the hill top and the London Clay Formation below.

17. Shalford ('Shallow ford') is the headquarters of the second of Brimpton's two manors and there was a settlement here in 1762 but it had disappeared by 1873. The farm house has timbers tree ring dated to 1430 and was probably the manor house.

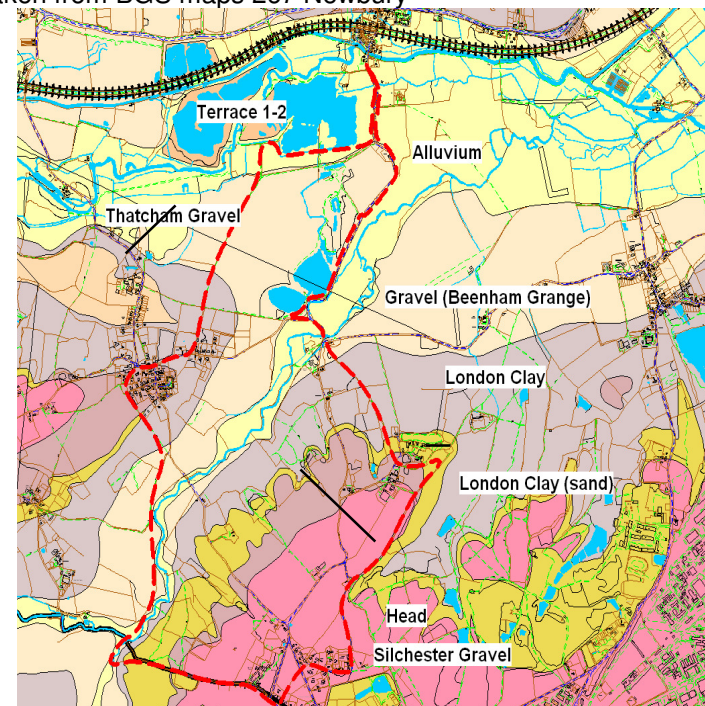
A bridge is mentioned in 1413.

18. Permissive Path. This runs inside the hedge parallel to the road. The Roman Road was found during excavations and was a few metres north of the assumed line. The flora is surprisingly rich and includes common spotted orchids.

19. Change of path. The path changes to run along the eastern side of the road but is frequently overgrown.

Solid and Superficial Geology

Detail taken from BGS maps 267 Newbury



1. The Ironside Line. This pillbox was built to guard the canal bridge during World War 2. The canal was fortified with pillboxes and anti-tank gun emplacements as a defence line against invading Nazi forces. It was called GHQ Line Blue, or The Ironside Line. Fortunately the line never had to be used. **Navigation Note.** Walk about 100m south along the road to a small bridge and take the path on the right just beyond it.

2. Ditches and pits. Depending on the time of year the ditch alongside the path is very flower rich. Look for *flag iris*, *cranesbill*, *comfrey*, *hop*, *meadowsweet*, *water dropwort* and the ancient plant *horsetail*. This plant is found in the Carboniferous coal measures and has changed little since. Nature is rapidly colonising the flooded gravel pit. Look for *common reed*,

sallow, *alder*, *willowherb*. There are many water birds: *coots*, *great crested grebes*, *mallards*, *Canada geese*, *terns*

3. Conservation area. The gravels in this area contain deposits of peat and a calcium carbonate deposit called tufa. Together these indicate climate change during the last 10,000 years. This newly worked out quarry has recently been designated a conservation area and will be managed for the benefit of water birds and wetland vegetation.

4. The Roman Road was one of the minor roads and not as massively engineered as the main roads. It ran from Silchester to Cirencester. An excavation in 1978 near Kings Bridge found only the side ditches and a thin layer of gravel. Similar remains were found in excavations ahead of gravel digging near Point 18. A modern road follows the line near Wasing Lower Farm and it is claimed to be traceable in Wasing Park.

5. Ancient Lane. Note the large ash coppice stools which are probably 250 years old and the species rich hedge. Look for ash, hawthorn, blackthorn, spindle, field maple

6. Brimpton. The 'Three Horseshoes' replaced an older pub, 'The Horse Shoes', which was considered to be too close to the new church. The War Memorial highlights the slaughter of World War 1. 22 men were killed as opposed to two in World War 2.

7. The church was built in 1869 and replaced an older church which itself probably replaced the Domesday church. It is dedicated to St Peter. Note the two large yews on the edge of the churchyard. They have girths of 3.1m indicating ages of about 300 years.

Navigation Note. Follow the footpath around the churchyard and turn left down the line of the hedge.

8. The Enborne Valley. There are good views up the valley from here. Chalk hills, representing deposition about 85 million years ago in warm shallow tropical seas, can be seen to the south. The beds have been uplifted and gently folded during the mountain building event which caused the Alps.

9. The Village School. You will probably hear this before you see it! Like many rural schools it was funded by public subscription and built in 1857 on land given by the Lord of the Manor.

Able Bridge ghost. A coach and four going to a hunt ball in Newbury on a stormy night did not see that the bridge had been washed away and drove into the flooded river. Everyone drowned and they now haunt the bridge!

10. Species rich hedge. Look for blackthorn, oak, field maple, dogwood, spindle, hazel and others.

Navigation Note. Turn left a few metres beyond the first waymark and footbridge to a second footbridge.

11. River Enborne rises in a pond at West Woodhay House and is the County Boundary for much of its length. The river has cut down into the London Clay which can be seen in its banks. It has a wide floodplain on the impermeable clay. It is fed by run-off as well as by springs and its level can change dramatically – hence the steep banks.



12. Hyde End is named for an early owner. It is probably the site of a Domesday mill and in 1417 it was a fulling mill washing newly woven cloth. A new mill was built in 1420 and in 1900 the site became a fish farm. The Great Western Railway had its headquarters here during World War 2. The County Boundary leaves the river here and runs up the small tributary stream to Oxford Bridge. **Inwood Copse** is a very ancient wood with a rich flora. It is mainly a hazel coppice with ash and oak standards. Some of the oaks are very large. In season look for bluebell, dog's mercury, currant, stitchwort, wood anemone, pignut, Solomon's seal, wood speedwell and many others.

13. County Boundaries are very ancient features and there must have been a very good reason for this one to leave such an easily defined feature as the river. The road up the hill is very deeply sunk and its verges are covered with a rich flora.

Blacknest Farm was a satellite of AWRE Aldermaston.

