

## 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 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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West Berkshire  
Countryside Society

## ‘RIVER and WOODS’

**A walk to explore the Countryside west and north of  
Stanford Dingley. Starting and finishing at  
Stanford Dingley church**

**About 4 miles or 6 km.**

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

There are two modest hills on this walk and surfaces can be uneven and muddy. There is one road crossing and a short length of road walking. The road is quiet.

## The significance of pairs of early churches and manor houses.

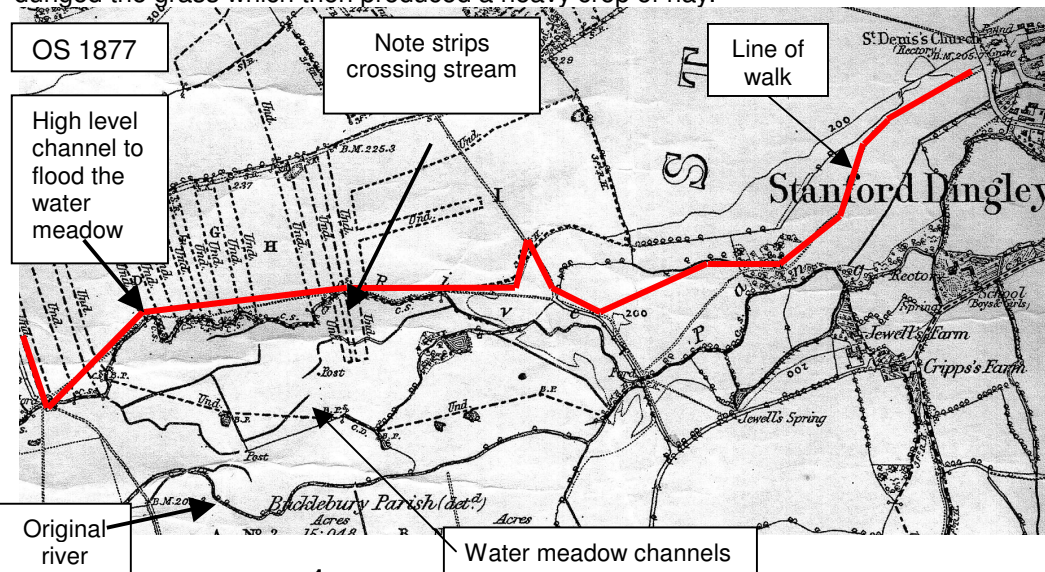
There are pairs of early churches and manor houses close to each other at short intervals along the Pang Valley. Bradfield, Stanford Dingley, Frilsham and Hampstead Norreys have such pairs and there may have been a manor house near Bucklebury church if the village name really does indicate that it was a defended enclosure in Saxon times.

These pairings are the result of King Alfred in the 9<sup>th</sup> century encouraging his followers to build churches on their estates in order to spread literacy and Christianity. Naturally the estate owners built their new church near their homes and, although both the church and the manor house have changed considerably over the last thousand years, the church is still on the same site and the manor house will have only moved slightly within the original site.

The manor houses were the administrative centres of large estates whose boundaries are shown today, with little change, by the modern parish boundaries.

## Water meadows.

It is common to refer to any soggy field alongside a river as a 'water meadow'. This could not be further from the truth. Water meadows were, in fact, the high point of late medieval agricultural engineering. The idea was imported from Holland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as so many agricultural advances have been. A water meadow consisted of an interlocking system of small channels. One series was linked to a *head leat* which carried water from a point higher up the river. Water in these channels flowed along the crests of low ridges built across the field. From them the water overflowed down the sides of the ridges into the second series of ditches that took it back to a lower level channel where it continued down the valley. Chalk water contains calcium and other nutrients. It slowed as it passed through the stems of the grass and deposited some of its load thus fertilising the field. Because the spring water in the river was likely to be warmer than late winter air it also warmed the grass. This caused an early growth of grass. In-lamb ewes were fed on the grass to give them a boost before lambing. They dunged the grass which then produced a heavy crop of hay.



**11. Chalk streams** Chalk is an internationally rare rock. Apart from England and northern France and Belgium, there are deposits in Canada and New Zealand. This makes chalk streams rare and important. They are fed by springs – not run off from surfaces – the water is thus filtered by the chalk and collects valuable minerals which support a wide range of plants and animals.

**12. Rushdens Farm.** **Navigation Note:** *the Public Right of Way runs up the drive, not along the outside of the hedge.* This is an ancient site. There was a house here in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries but the existing house is modern. It is a Spring Line settlement built where a reliable spring flowed from the hill behind the house. Note the ancient oak pollard in the drive hedge.

**13. A Change of geology** becomes very apparent in wet weather as you climb the hill and thick *London Clay* sticks to your boots!

**14. Parish Boundary Bank.** Parish boundaries were fixed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. There have been minor changes since. Banks and ditches like this have been found to be much older – boundaries of Roman and even Iron Age estates. The ditch marks the boundary, not the bank.

**15. Old Hawkridge House.** The whole area north of the Pang and south of the steep ridge was known as *Hawkridge* and there was a Manor of Hawkridge. This splendid 16<sup>th</sup> century house may have been the manor house. This is also a Spring Line site,

**16. Ancient road.** The banks and ditches on either side of this track and the ancient trees growing on them indicate this is an ancient road. It led from the meadows and arable land around Bucklebury up to the rough grazing on the ridge. Note the very steep slope to the east. This was caused by the different rates of erosion of the

London Clay and Lambeth Beds and was made steeper in places by quarrying clay for brick making.

**17. Knife edged ridge.** The path runs along a ridge not much more than 50m wide with steep slopes on either side. This whole area is shown covered with small fields on the 1761 map.

**18. Pond.** The sands and gravels of this area are pervious and there is no surface water so ponds like this were built to provide water for grazing animals. **The land is private and permission should be obtained from Yattendon Estates to visit the pond.**

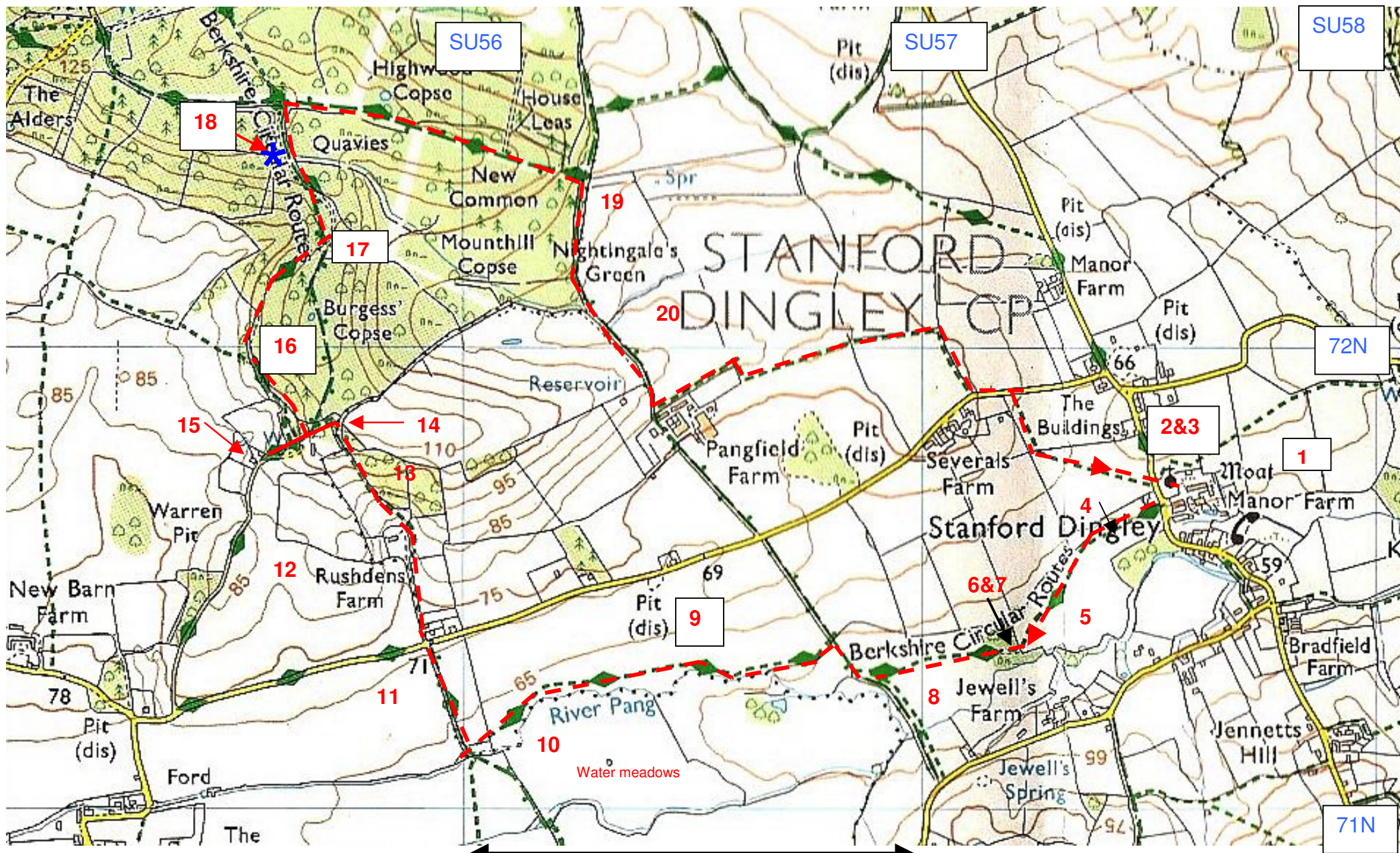
**19. Another ancient road.** This track was the road between Yattendon and Bucklebury Common. It can be traced north of Yattendon and south of Bucklebury Common down to the Kennet Valley.

**20. Pangfield Farm** was originally *Field Farm* and was probably built when the fields around it were enclosed by private agreement at some date before 1761. It may be that **New Common** was given as compensation for grazing lost due to the enclosures. It is possible that these fields are the *flax fields* mentioned in the 10<sup>th</sup> century charter. (See 5 and 6).

**Nightingales Green** marks an area where the roadside banks lie further apart. Such wide areas are quite common along drove roads and may be areas where animals could be held over night. A similar area to the west at Westrop Green was equipped with a pond for the animals and a pub for the drovers! *Nightingale* is a family name in this area and it may be the name of the family who lived in the two houses marked here on the 1761 map.







1 kilometre

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**1. Stanford Dingley** is an ancient village. Roman remains have been found in the village and the name is Old English and means *stony ford* which aptly describes the river bed at the bridge which was the site of the ford. Domesday Book (1086) reports 13 families and a valuable mill. The mill was probably on the site of the modern mill near the bridge. Once the infrastructure of ponds, channels and sluices had been constructed mills stayed put and only the mill building was replaced as the vibration of the machinery shook it apart! The name *Dingley* comes from the family who held the manor in 1428.

**2. The church** of St Denys may have been built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century but has been changed and added to over the centuries. The heavily restored doorway is 13<sup>th</sup> century and the font is Norman. There are remains of wall paintings.

**3. Manor Farm Yard** is now the headquarters of a company that makes and repairs timber framed buildings. They built the replica of the Globe theatre in London. The **Manor House** is reported as having a moat in 1643.

**4. Fish ponds** were part of the normal equipment of a manor house. They supplied fish for religious 'meat free' days and as a change from salt meat in the winter.

**5. Possible flax retting ponds.** A 10<sup>th</sup> century charter mentions flax fields in the area north of the Pang. (See 6&20). To release the fibres the flax stalks have to be soaked and then left to rot so that the outer material can be scraped off. These ponds are typical of the temporary ponds used.

**6. Ancient Woodland.** This little patch of woodland may be all that is left of a 60 acre wood detailed in a charter dated 956AD granting oak trees to Abingdon Abbey. Saxon charters give detailed descriptions of the boundaries of the land being transferred and the description fits this area quite well. There are several

Ancient Woodland Indicator plants in the ground flora and the pits extend into the wood. Look for (in season) bluebell, Solomon's seal, wood sorrel, enchanter's nightshade, yellow archangel and yellow flag iris.

**7. Alder trees** were very valuable. They could be grown on land too wet for arable crops and could be harvested regularly for scaffold poles, clog soles, to make charcoal for gunpowder and to use for riverside piling since the wood resists rot if kept wet. The tree also provides at least two vegetable dyes.

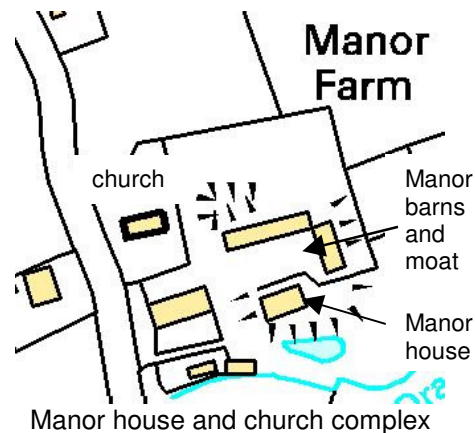
**8. Wet meadows** are valuable habitats for insects, amphibians, animals, plants and trees and the birds and animals that feed on them. Look for willows, sallows, alder, sedges, yellow flag iris, common and marsh mallow, yarrow, silverweed and buttercups.

**9. Common Open Fields** were divided into long narrow unfenced strips rather like a modern allotment garden. Tenants of the manor held varying numbers of strips scattered across the field. This was originally intended to share out the better and poorer land in a fair way. The strips were managed by the Manor Court. They are shown on the 1877 map with the parish boundary running around them. This often means that the two parishes were once a single unit.



The Common Field arrangement of strips

**10. Water meadow hatch.** See the note on page 1. When open this hatch let water flow along the crest of the drowning ridges from which it flowed through the grass into the draining channels and back to the lower channel. Closing it dried the field.



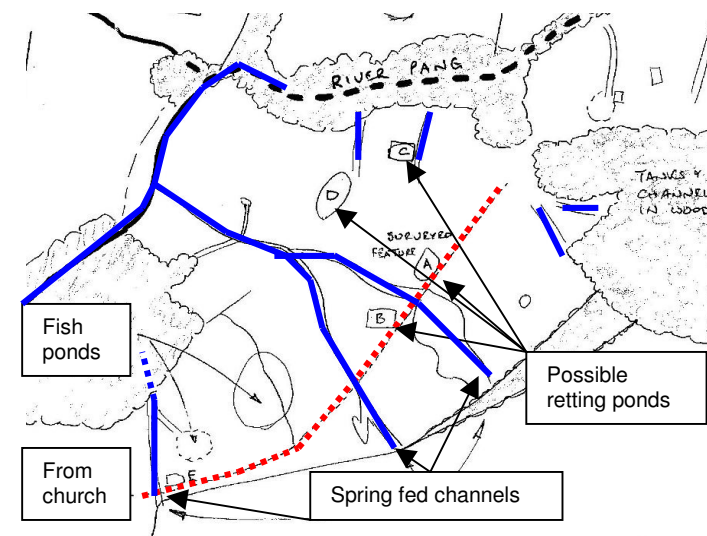
Manor house and church complex



Stanford Dingley church



Church door with 13C ironwork



Fish ponds and flax retting ponds at Point 5



Water meadow hatch at Point 10



Old Hawkridge House at Point 15