

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, visits and conducted walks.

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 task groups and conducted walks for which we make no charge. Non-members are also welcome at our talks for which we do 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

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Countryside Society

CASTLE, GREY SUITS & WASHING MACHINE.

A walk around Donnington and Bagnor. Starting and finishing at Donnington Castle

About 2¼ miles or 3.7 km.

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

There is one short steep hill at the castle and a modest long climb from the river back up to the castle car park. The walk passes through an active golf course and along a hotel drive. It is important to stay on the Rights of Way and to look out for traffic. At the Bagnor river crossing there are two narrow footbridges with single handrails.

A Short History of Donnington Castle.

The castle is sited at a place of both great strategic importance and also of great tactical strength. It controlled the important east-west route from London to the west running along the Kennet Valley and also the north-south route from the Channel ports to the Midlands through Winchester and Oxford. It derives its tactical strength by being sited on the southern tip of a ridge that is steep sided on three sides and only easily approached along a knife edged ridge from the north. There was probably a manor house here in 1086. It was sold to the Abberbury family in 1287-8 but it was only formally fortified in 1386. Richard de Abberbury had fought at the Battle of Poitiers and probably at Crecy. He was guardian to the Black Prince's son who later became Richard II. He built the gatehouse as an addition to an existing house. It was one of a group of castles that mark the change from Spartan military utility to a more luxurious style of architecture that still maintained defensive strength.

At the start of the Civil War (1642-46) it belonged to John Packer who, in 1640, refused to lend money to the king and therefore lost his castle. In September 1643 Col. John Boys was sent to hold the castle for the king. He arrived with 200 men and 4 cannon and constructed the arrowhead earth fortifications which enabled him to hold out against attacks by much larger forces. Newbury was a Parliament town and Boys raided it on a number of occasions, once almost capturing the mayor and other leading citizens. After the Second Battle the king retreated to Oxford leaving his crown and Great Seal in the castle. The siege started in July 1644 and lasted until, after 20 months, the king gave Boys permission to surrender. He negotiated terms that allowed him to march out carrying loaded weapons and with his colours flying. His enemies must have been glad to see him go!

After the war the castle was deliberately slighted to prevent any further military use.

A Short History of Bagnor.

The place name is mysterious. The second element means slope, but the meaning of the first element is unknown but may be a lost word for some kind of animal. The manor is mentioned in Domesday Book (1086). It was tiny having only 3 villagers, 3 smallholders and one slave. It had 22 acres of meadow [along the river] and very little woodland. It had one very valuable mill. This would have been a watermill for grinding corn. It was probably on the same site as the theatre mill because once the infrastructure of channels and sluices has been built the site of a mill continues to be used and only the mill building is rebuilt. Mill buildings had to be rebuilt fairly frequently because the vibration caused by the machinery shook them to bits! The abbey of Poughly at Chaddleworth held the manor from 1235 to 1524. In 1428 a second mill was built further downstream. This was demolished during the landscaping of Donnington Park, but was probably near the folly below the bridge.

'Jack of Newbury' may have had a fulling mill here in the mid 1500s. The 'Watermill' mill was built as a fulling mill in 1839 on the site of a paper mill shown on a map of 1761. It was converted to grind corn in 1856 and closed after World War 1. Fulling mills were used to wash newly woven cloth using a washing liquid made from human urine! The washed (and rinsed?) cloth was then hung up to dry in Rack Marsh using tenterhooks. The abandoned mill was bought by the Gollins family in 1958 and converted to a theatre which opened in 1968.



An alder coppice stool

This valuable tree provided scaffold poles, piling for riverbanks, clog soles, high grade gunpowder and a vegetable dye. And it would grow well on otherwise useless land. Note the drop from the path into the flood plain. This was caused by plough loosened soil moving downhill and building up along the boundary over hundreds of years.

7. Building site. This was anciently 'Grove Farm' and later became a fish farm

8. Open Fields & Ancient oak. The area of the golf course was the Open Fields of Speen. A map of 1730-40 shows the area covered in furlongs and strips. It was probably



Veteran Oak c. 450 years old

enclosed later in the 18th century.

The oak tree was in one of the hedges, as were the other surviving veterans. Its girth is 18'10" (5.74m) indicating an age of about 450 years

9. The Lake, river and ponds. Look for trout in the river, herons, coots and ducks in the ponds. Yellow flag iris, reed mace, willowherb



Yellow flag iris

10. Donnington Grove was built shortly before 1772 for the antiquary James Pettit Andrews. In about 1785 it was bought and remodelled in the Gothic style by the father of 'Beau' Brummell. He dammed the river to form the lake and built the classical styled bridge and fishing lodge, demolishing an ancient mill to do so. His son 'Beau' Brummell (1778-1840) changed men's fashion from ornate and colourful clothes to understated but perfectly fitted tailored coats and long trousers. He is reputed to have taken five hours to dress! The fashion has only changed in detail ever since as anyone who attends business meetings will testify! He joined the 10th Royal Hussars and became a close friend of the then Prince of Wales. His extravagant life style soon ran through his fortune and he died a pauper of syphilis in France.

1. The castle sits on a cap of hard sands and gravels which overlie London Clay which, in turn, sits on chalk. Its history is more fully explained on page 2. It is worth the steep climb for an excellent view and to see the fortification that allowed Col Boys to hold out for so long. There is also a splendid Ancient Pollard Oak – see page 3 just north of the castle. Its girth of 6.43m makes it in the order of 600 years old.

2. Quarries and old road. The small hollows cut into the east side of the path may be clay quarries. The bluebells and old trees indicate that they are several centuries old. Look for the spring coming out where the pervious upper soils meet clay. A level terrace runs beside the path on the west. This is probably an old road. Look for the old oak tree on the path side near the castle. It has a girth of 4.70m and is probably 300 years old. There is a picture on page 3.

3. Ancient Woodland Indicators (AWIS). *Ancient Woodland* is technically woodland that can be shown to have existed since at least 1600. It typically has a range of plants that have poor seed dispersal ability.



Yellow archangel is a common indicator.

Once they have been destroyed they rarely return so their presence indicates lack of ground disturbance over a long period. The most easily recognised are bluebell, wood anemone, yellow archangel, wood sorrel, pignut, wood spurge, wood sedge and a grass – wood melick. The more species there are the more likely the wood is to be *Ancient*. Trees are almost irrelevant to a wood. They change with market demand.

4. Bagnor. See page 2

5. Rack Marsh may have been caused by the damming of the river to provide a head of water to drive the mill. This ancient wet meadow reputedly gets its name from the wooden racks used to dry cloth after it had been fulled in the mills.

Rack Marsh is a BBOWT Reserve and a permit should be obtained to stray from the Right of Way. Look for meadow-sweet, red clover, ragged robin, lesser stitchwort, kingcups,



Kingcups

marsh horsetail, silverweed, marsh marigold, marsh valerian, early marsh orchids and many others. It is also home to the rare and tiny (2mm) Desmoulin's snail. At the river crossing look for water mint, water forget-me-not, butterbur

6. Wetland coppice and road crossing. The path marks the edge of the Open Fields. This valuable wetland was used to grow willow for thatching spars and baskets and even for making hats. Look for alder coppice stools near the bridge.



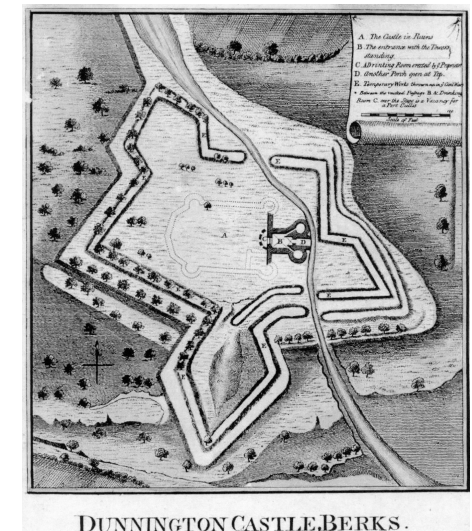
The Watermill Theatre



Ancient Woodland Indicator Species – bluebells and wood anemones



A 300 year old maiden oak



DUNNINGTON CASTLE, BERKS.



Donnington Castle from the south



An Ancient pollard oak – possibly 600 years old, within musket range of the defences.

