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

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 this its geology and aeodiversity.

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 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 01993

814147 or Lesley.dunlop@oxfordshire.gov.uk.

Website www.berkshirerigs.org.uk

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West Berkshire **Countryside Society**

WEST BERKSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE SOCIETY BERKSHIRE GEOCONSERVATION GROUP

'ABOVE & BELOW HUNGERFORD'

A walk around the Hungerford countryside to look at the interaction between geology, wildlife and human history. Starting and finishing on Hungerford Common.

About 7 miles or 11km.

Ordnance Survey Explorer Map158 – 'Newbury & Hungerford' will be useful

There is one steep hill at the end of this walk.

We wish to acknowledge the help given by Hugh and Lois Pihlens of the Hungerford Historical Association.

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General Geology

Hungerford lies on chalk of Cretaceous age. In this area it represents deposition in warm, shallow, tropical seas about 90-80 million years ago and is some of the youngest chalk in Berkshire. At the time Britain lay further south than its present position. Chalk is composed of microorganisms, coccoliths, and the lack of impurities has led to a very white pure limestone. Overlying the chalk are sands and clavs of the Lambeth Formation, which were deposited in estuarine conditions about 55 million years ago. Tropical vegetation remains including leaf fragments and root holes can be found to give climate evidence. More recently, particularly over the last 1.8 million years, erosion has taken place and this has led to the development of the landscape seen at the present time. One interesting deposit is the clay-with-flints found at point 1.

How the geology has affected the human history.

The town of Hungerford has developed at the point at which several river valleys meet allowing for easy transport routes. Buildings in the town reflect local geology with much use being made of local brick from the Palaeogene sands and clays. Remains of a brick kiln can be seen north of the river at point 13. There is also use of sarsen stones. Following the building of the canal more Jurassic limestone was used and this was brought from the Bath area.

A short history of Hungerford. The manor is not mentioned in Domesday Book (1086) but there were certainly people living in the area for thousands of years before this since stone tools have been found on Hungerford Down and a Bronze Age barrow exists at Eddington. Recently the traces of pre-historic or Roman fields have been recognised on the Common. The early settlement was around the church and the Croft. The planned town to the east had borough status by 1170 and had been laid out on either side of High Street by 1296. The place name means the ford where people starved and is first recorded between 1103 and 1118. Perhaps this means that the new town was not an immediate success? A fair is recorded in 1361. It is possible that the new town was sponsored by Simon de Montfort but the grant of the Common Land on Hungerford Down and Freeman's Marsh was obtained from John of Gaunt in the 14th century. There was probably a charter but one copy was destroyed by fire in 1381 and the town's copy was allegedly stolen in Queen Elizabeth I's reign. In 1688 Prince William of Orange met the King,s Commissioners at Hungerford in his march on London after being invited to replace King James. He stayed at Littlecote House and the Commissioners at the Bear Hotel. His terms were carried by Commissioners to King James, but by the time they reached London the king had fled. Hungerford's position on the natural route from London to the west has given it an important place in transport history. The Bath Road (A4) was an early Turnpike Road and the length past the town was improved in 1744. The canal came next in 1810 and in 1818 200 barges were carrying up to 60 tons each along it. The town became the railhead for a while when the railway reached the town in 1847. In 1852 the Great Western Railway bought the canal and let it decay to eliminate competition. During World War 2 the canal was fortified as a tank obstacle and became 'The Ironside Line'.





Sarsen at Sanham Green Point 4

River Shalbourne as a watermeadow channel Point 5



Locally made bricks at Standen Farm A 600 year old ash stool at Point 7 Point 6





The canal at Point 11



The River Dun at Point 14

12. Older features. Look for the terraces on the slope to the south of the canal. These were caused by medieval ploughing. The holloway running SE was an old road to the original settlement.



Hungerford's 'pest house' (isolation hospital) lay a little way along this. **13. Freeman's Marsh** is another of the Commons of Hungerford. The site lies on the floodplain of the River Dun, a small tributary of the River Kennet, rising in the chalk to the southwest. The soils consist of calcareous alluvial gleys formed from river alluvium. These soils readily retain water.

Use of Commons was not available to everyone but only to *Commoners* who were qualified by holding tenancies or owning particular properties. It is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the NE corner is a Nature Reserve. **Dogs should be kept on leads here.**

Hopgrass Farm House (1642) is named after farmers of that name in 1343.



The marsh was used from a very early date as a source of hay and as grazing land. At an early date the Northern Meadow was converted to a water meadow. These are carefully engineered systems that deliver very lush crops of grass early in the year allowing ewes to gain condition after the winter before lambing. Later in the year they provide large amounts of hay. They are labour intensive and went out of use in the late 19th century. The marsh and the Reserve are both very species rich and are managed by carefully regulated grazing which keeps down the coarse grasses, thistles and nettles and allows the more delicate plants to thrive. In season look for: marsh orchids, ragged robin and bogbean, meadow saxifrage and many others. Christine Knight's book is especially recommended (see page 8). 14. River Dun. This is an important chalk stream, valuable for its water plants and fish and invertebrate life. Look for water crowfoot, water mint, brooklime and many others. The hazel hurdle structures in the river increase the flow rate and keep the gravel bed silt free.

15. Church. The existing church was built in 1814 on the site of two successive earlier churches which served the original settlement.



16. The Croft. This is the 'village green' around which the earliest settlement developed.

Solid and Superficial Geology

Detail taken from BGS maps 267 Newbury



1. Hungerford Common.

The common has very mixed geology. The northern edge is on chalk but to the south clay-with-flints is found. This deposit formed during the Quaternary and consists of flint fragments in a clay matrix. Typically it is found on the dip slope and underlain by chalk.

Compared to chalk it is relatively acidic with a pH of about 6. There are small patches of Palaeogene sands on the high ground.

History. The Down was part of the lands granted to the town by John of Gaunt in the 14th century but it had been worked for millennia before this. Crossing it in late afternoon on a sunny winters day will make the vast number of earthworks apparent. They date from every period from the Bronze Age to World War 2. The long hedge running along the north edge is the

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Old and Great Market Road to Newbury, There was also an early 20th Century golf course. The lower ridges in the west may be Roman field boundaries. The large quarry probably provided road material during the period before 1889 when parishes were responsible for their own roads. The low ring banks may be a part of 19th century tree planting but the trees may have been planted on existing features!

2. Ancient hedge. The large hazel coppice stools show the bank to be at least 300 years old and the bluebells show that this hedge is a relic of older woodland.

3. Old Road and Woodland. This is the original Salisbury Road. The wood is 'new'. It was not here in 1873. The pits were probably for road making material before 1889.

4. Sarsens and Parish Boundary.

Sarsens formed during the deposition of

esturarine sands of the Reading Formation. Some areas are much better cemented and so resist erosion. Good examples of root holes can be seen. The parish boundary is marked by the ditch, not the bank. Parish boundaries in this area were established by the 9th century, so this feature is over a 1000 years old. 5. Standen Manor is one of the many Domesday manors that surround Hungerford. The field to the SW of the bridge contains ploughed out Bronze Age Barrows. The fields north and south of the bridge were once engineered watermeadows and relics of the channels and sluices are still visible. The house is early 18th C. 6. Local bricks. This wall is made of bricks fired in a local kiln. The colours, glazing and banding are typical of bricks made from the Reading formation. Grey bricks are fired to a higher temperature with a glaze formed from bottles, salt and bracken added during the firing process. 7. Ancient woodland. The rich ground flora of this little wood shows that it is an Ancient Wood and was here before 1600. The field maple stools on the banks are at least 350 years old. There is an excellent view of the chalk escarpment to the south. Walbury Hill with its Iron Age fort lies to the east. At 297 metres (974feet) it is the highest point on the chalk. Beyond the wood the path is on a boggy gravel capping as can be seen from the rushes and the alders and silver birch.

8. Quarry & Ancient tree. The cap ends suddenly and its thinness can be seen in the quarry side. The ash stool is probably 600 years old and gives a minimum date of c.1400 for the bank on which it stands.

9. North Standen House. There was a 13th century chapel here and it is



thought that it is also the site of a deserted medieval village. Notice how close the chalk is to the surface at the end of the lane and how deeply sunk the lane itself is.

10. Change of geology. The sudden drop into the valley indicates a change in the nature of the bedrock. This chalk horizon is softer and more easily eroded than other horizons. The valleys were formed by erosion when the water flow was greater during the Quaternary. Once again the depth to which hooves, feet and wheels have cut this path shows that it has been here a long time. Note the ancient coppice stools on the bank. **11. A significant site for transport history.** In a space of 100 metres we can see an 18th century turnpike road, an early 19th century canal and the mid 19th century railway that made it obsolete. These clumps of *Greater tussock sedge* were planted to protect the banks from barges and may be over 100 years old. The River Dun, another chalk stream, passes under the canal just west of Cobblers Lock.



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