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

Find out more:

Hermitage. *Footpaths, Bridleways & Byways.* 2009

Victoria County History – Berkshire

The Concise Dictionary of English Placenames. OUP.

Rackham O. *The History of the Countryside* 1997

Rackham O. *Woodlands* 2006

Williamson T *Shaping Medieval Landscapes* 2003

Greenaway & Ward (Eds) *In the Valley of the Pang* 2002

Greenaway D. *Around the Valley of the Pang* 2007

Dunlop L. Greenaway D. *Around the 3 Valleys.* 2011

West Berkshire Countryside Society

This leaflet is designed to be printed double-sided and then folded into an A5 leaflet

A LOOK AT THE FAR EAST
(OF HERMITAGE PARISH)

A Walk around Hermitage Parish

About 6½ km or 4 miles.

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

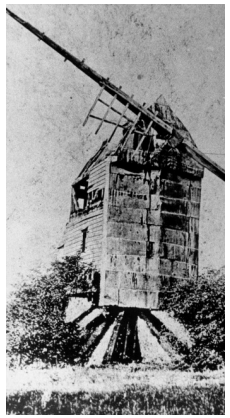
There are several modest hills and a number of stiles on this walk and surfaces can be muddy and uneven.

Hermitage History. The parish was once part of a large late-Saxon estate based on Hampstead Norreys but there is evidence that people lived in the area from a much earlier date. For instance, Grimsbury Castle is an Iron Age (750BC-40AD) hill fort and would have required a large population to construct and defend it. There is Roman settlement as well. The main settlement grew up at the crossing point of two ancient drove routes near Faircross Pond which gave its name to Faircross Hundred. *Hundreds* were late Saxon administrative units and Faircross Hundred is first mentioned in 1256. The local sands, clays and chalk provided materials for brick and tile making which only ceased in 1967. Hermitage became a separate parish in 1840.

The Landscape History of the Walk Route. As can be seen from the map opposite, the first part of the walk is over what was in 1761 open scrub land crossed by a network of unfenced tracks. It was part of the Common Pasture of Hampstead Norreys and was enclosed in 1778. It probably survived as a Common because the soils are either sandy or clayey loams over a solid geology of chalk. Both soils are acid and infertile and the sand lets too much water through and the clay retains too much water making neither attractive to early farmers. Further south the land was part of the Manor of Marlston and is shown as enclosed with hedged boundaries and with areas of woodland. As we will see, the boundaries and copses appear to be ancient. Both Marlston and Boars Hole are early settlements.

The Coppice Cycle. Managing woods to produce crops of standard size sticks and poles at short intervals goes back to the Neolithic Period – at least 5,000 years ago; but the widespread conversion of ***wood pasture*** (low density woods in which animals grazed) to ***coppices*** seems to have started in the 12th and 13th centuries as the population grew and so much land was cleared for arable farming that wood supplies became threatened. ***Coppicing*** involves cutting a deciduous tree near ground level and allowing it to shoot. The shoots are then cut at short intervals (1, 8, 15 years etc) to supply poles of the size required. Most deciduous trees will coppice, but the most usual in this area are hazel, alder and ash followed by maple, beech and oak. In other areas hornbeam and sweet chestnut were used. Dedicating an area of an ancient wood pasture as coppice, preserved the flora growing in the wood. Ancient coppices are flower rich. The years of shade after the canopy closed suppressed coarse herbage such as bramble and bracken. The burst of light after felling allowed the flowers to flourish and spread. Most of our best bluebell woods are ancient coppices. ***Pollarding*** involves cutting the tree at about two metres above the ground. The shoots are then out of reach of browsing animals and cattle, horses and sheep can graze the area around the trees.

Ancient Woodland Indicator Species. A wood known to have existed in 1600 is classed as ***Ancient Secondary Woodland.*** We have no primary woodland in Britain but many woods are over a thousand years old. Hawkridge Wood (Frilsham) was there to be granted to Abingdon Abbey in 956AD. These woods have rich ground floras particularly of plants that once destroyed do not return. These are listed by English Nature and used to identify Ancient Woods. They are such plants as bluebell, wood anemone, yellow archangel, dog's mercury, primrose, sweet woodruff, early purple orchid etc. The more listed plants a wood has, the better the chance of it being ancient.



The Little Hungerford windmill that was moved to Compton

Standing deadwood provides valuable Habitats. *Point 3*

The age of coppice stools can be estimated from their average diameter.Allow 0.3m per century for ash, hazel & oak. 0.6m/century for sweet chestnut, *Point 6*

This deeply sunk track marks the Parish Boundary and is probably over a thousand years old. *Point 9*

Marlston
A relic of the original church dated ?1706

Church
A beautiful modern grave stone

'Railway style' sheds at Boars Hole Farm. *Point 20*

An older, recently restored, granary on staddle stones to deter rats. *Point 21*

An ancient stub oak growing on a boundary bank at *Point 25*

15. Hawkridge House and Frilsham Watermeadows. Hawkridge House was built by Mr Harry Weber, a colourful character who had made a fortune in the South African gold fields. He entertained lavishly employing itinerant German bands and he gave the well to Hampstead Norreys in 1903. He suddenly disappeared when his money ran out. The water-meadows were on the flat area to the west of the Pang. Watermeadows are not just soggy fields alongside a river. They were carefully constructed and maintained networks of small ditches along the crest of ridges. Sluices built across the rivers raised the water level sufficiently to allow a flow along the ridges which then overflowed down their sides and was fed back to the river by other ditches. The moving film of water warmed and fertilised the ground in early spring and provided an early crop of rich grass for in-lamb ewes. They in turn dunged the grass which then produced large crops of hay. They were expensive to build and labour intensive and died out during the 19th century agricultural depression.

16. Elm hedge. Elm is invasive and spreads by suckering. Dutch Elm Disease killed the great trees in the 1970's but the root systems live on sending up suckers to grow to about 5 or 6 metres before they too succumb.

17. Marlston House and Church. This is an ancient settlement. It was the headquarters of Marlston Manor, a sub-manor of Bucklebury. In 1066 it was granted to the monastery of Noyon in Normandy. In 1242 it was held by Galfridus Martel who gave it its name *Marteleston* or *Martel's settlement.* The church dates from about 1200 and the north door is Norman. It was heavily rebuilt in the 19th century and the sundial seems to be a relic of the old church. Marlston Manor House was on the nearby site of Brockhurst School, a common arrangement of early manors. The modern house was built by the Palmers of Reading between 1895-9.

18. View to fox coverts. The neat circular wood was provided both as a landscape feature and as a lurking ground for foxes from which they could be flushed by hounds and hunted.

19. West Wood. This wood is shown on the 1761 map but is probably much older. The rhododendrons may be very pretty but they are very destructive. Their dense foliage and indestructible leaf litter completely destroy the original flora.

20. Boars Hole Farm. This is an old settlement that was turned into a Model Farm for Marlston House. Note the 'railway style' sheds. The chimney in the distance was part of a steam engine which drew water from a well and pumped it to a reservoir from which it was piped around the estate.

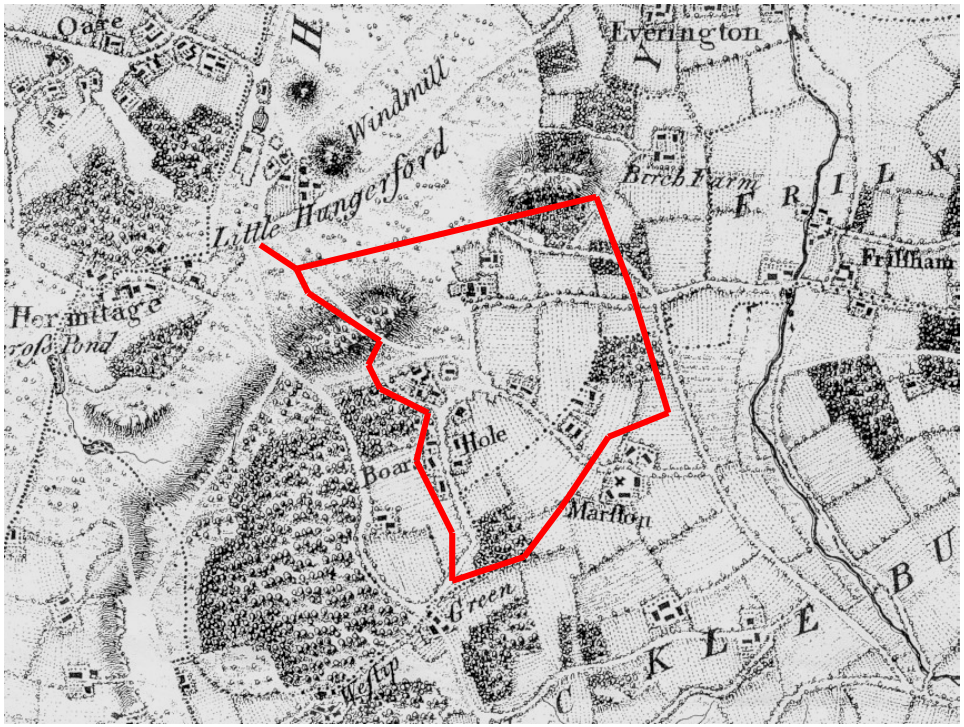
21. The newly restored barns and granary are part of the older farm.

22. Shop. The house with the very obvious 'shop window' was a shop in the early 1900's.

23. Stile

24. Oak stub. This oak was cut higher than a coppice stool but lower than a pollard. It is about 250 years old and probably dates from the enclosure period. It also provides a minimum date for the bank on which it stands.

25. Navigation note. Take care to choose the third path. The first two are forestry tracks.



The walk area in 1761 from John Rocque's *Survey of Berkshire*
The approximate route of the walk is shown in red.

1. Windmill Lane. The 1761 map on the previous page shows this area as unfenced open scrub land seamed with tracks and with the windmill standing on a hill. This track was part of an ancient road leading from the Ridgeway across the scrubland to Bucklebury Common and the southeast. The banks on either side made it easier to keep herds of cattle together so that they could be driven by fewer men. The mill was a post mill where the shed containing the stones and holding the sails was pivoted on a single massive post set in the ground. It was moved and re-erected at Compton in the late 1700's and collapsed soon after 1900. The ancient oak has a girth of 4.09m indicating an age of about 250-300 years. It may have been established when the scrubland was enclosed in 1778.

2. Stile.

3. Deadwood. Deadwood, particularly standing deadwood, is of great value for wildlife and should be retained whenever possible. The peeling bark, rotten wood and wet hollows provide habitats for invertebrates, insects and larger creatures which are the foundation of the food chain. *'Without dead wood your wood is dead!'*

4. Sandy soil. This soil is the reason that the area remained scrub to such a late date. It does not hold moisture and is likely to be acid and infertile.

5. Stile. Quarry and Beeches. The deep pit beside the stile is a sand quarry. The larger beech trees have a girth of about 3.6m indicating an age of about 200 years and may be the first planting after the enclosure.

6. Ancient woodland and field system. The number of Ancient Wood-land Indicator Species (AWIS) in the ground flora makes it probable that this copse is an Ancient Wood. This is confirmed by the size of the sweet chestnut stools whose diameter of 1.4m indicates an age of about 250 years. The banks lying Under the coppice are clearly older than the wood and may be Iron Age or Roman.

7. Sand pit. Another large quarry.

8. Steep hill. This sudden escarpment indicates a change of geology, probably onto harder gravels

9. Parish Boundary. Parish boundaries in this area are thought to have been established by the late 9th century and so this track may be over a thousand years old. It has been cut deeply into the surface by hundreds of years of wear by feet, hooves and wheels.

10. View over the Pang Valley. It is obvious that the tiny Pang does not need such a large valley. In fact it has been cut by the much larger water flows during warmer periods in the last Ice Age.

11. Using plants to date features. The massive ash and field maple coppice stools standing on the bank just inside the wood are 400-500 years old, therefore the bank must be <u>at least</u> that old. The bluebells and other AWIS plants confirm its age.

12. Quarry. This large pit was probably for gravel rather than sand. It must have been worked for many years to have grown so large.

13. Species rich bank. Woodland plants have to flower and set seed before the tree buds burst and close the canopy shutting out the light. Open country plants wait to get the full benefit of the summer sun. Look for bluebells in May but for the scabious, toadflax, knapweed, campion, agrimony …. On this bank in July.

14. Hazel coppice. The large field maple stools on the bank show that it is at least 400-500 years old, and the bluebell and wood sorrel confirm that it is Ancient Woodland. These coppices were an important part of the rural economy.