

## 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 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 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)

### References:

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Countryside Society

## ‘THE WOODS of HAMPSTEAD NORREYS’

**A walk around Park Wood and Down Wood in  
Hampstead Norreys Parish. Starting and finishing at  
the Village Hall**

**About 1¾ miles or 2.8 km.**

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

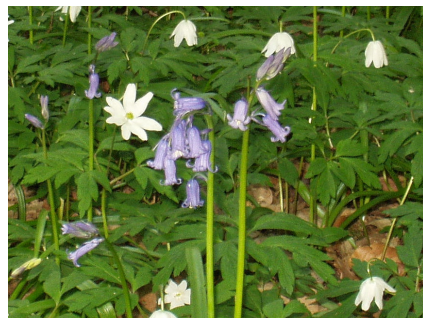
There is a modest hill on this walk and surfaces can be uneven and  
muddy

**Hampstead Norreys.** The name means 'farm place' and there has been a settlement of some kind here for at least two thousand years and probably for as much as four and a half thousand years since many Roman finds have been made in the area and there are Bronze Age burial mounds close to the north and south of the village. The manor is listed in Domesday Book (1086) as having belonged to King Edward (the last Saxon king) and as having been allocated to Theodoric the Goldsmith after the Norman Conquest. The name changed to *Hampstead Sifrewast* in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and to *Hampstead Norreys* when it was bought by the Norreys family of Bray in 1450.

**Early Saxon Estates.** Current historical research indicates that, after the re-conquest of southern England from the invading Danes by King Alfred the Great and his family in the late 9<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the country was divided up into very large estates controlled by the king's immediate family and senior colleagues. These estates were soon sub-divided and tenanted by lesser lords. These smaller estates were constructed so that they had a mixture of land types. Typically the headquarters would be in a valley near the river and surrounded by the arable land and hay meadows, but the estate would spread up the valley sides until it met the land of the estate based in the next valley. This remoter land would be used for pasture and for supplying woodland products. King Alfred encouraged the spread of Christianity and literacy and local lords began to build churches on their estates. They naturally built them conveniently close to their own dwelling. The priest was funded by the Tithe – a tenth of the increase of the land – from his parish and the parish would coincide with his patron's estate. Thus parish boundaries often show us Saxon estates. They are often marked by earthen banks and ditches which have sometimes been shown to be very much older and perhaps the boundaries of Roman or Iron Age land holdings.

**Deer Parks.** Medieval deer parks were both the ultimate status symbol and a strictly practical method of producing meat. They were mainly a product of the 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Statute of Merton in 1235 allowed lords of manors to enclose parts of the manorial waste to create deer parks providing they left 'sufficient' for their tenants. If the site was in or near a royal Forest a licence called a Grant of Free Warren was needed before a park could be created. They were usually stocked with fallow deer but could hold wild pigs, and red or roe deer.

**Ancient Woodland Indicator Species (AWIS)** are plants adapted to growing in shade and that have poor powers of seed dispersal – like the bluebells and wood anemones opposite. This means that if they are destroyed by ploughing or trampling they do not easily return. Woods are not usually ploughed and grazing is likely to be intermittent. Therefore a wood with a number of these species is likely to be Ancient. An 'Ancient Wood' is defined as having existed since at least 1600. Natural



**8. ? Old pond.** This circular depression is another relic of the pre-woodland landscape. The local soils are pervious and there is no surface water so ponds would have been necessary if animals were to be grazed in the area. Similar ponds exist in other woods, at least one of which still holds water.



**Down Wood.** In this case 'down' and 'wood' come from the Old English words *dun* and *wudu* meaning 'hill' and 'wood'. This is another indication of the wood's age – an indication emphasised by its rich flora.

**9. Chalk quarry.** The local soils are not only pervious they are also acid and chalk was used to 'sweeten' them. See Note 1.

**10. 'Farmer's' limekiln.** (See page 2). These pits are often found near chalk quarries. They produced small quantities of lime for making mortar and limewash. Chalk blocks from the quarry were stacked in the pit mixed with dry wood and burned. This produced highly corrosive *quick lime* that had to be quenched with water before it could be used. The heat during firing was intense and would not have permitted the oak on the bank to exist. This oak is 150-200 years old thus putting last use of the pit in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A magnetometer survey showed intense heating around the rim of the pit.

**11. Look for the anomalies.** This long path is quite dry for most of its length. Why are these puddles at the eastern end? They lie in the hollows between long low ridges running north into the trees. These may be hard to see when the vegetation is high but are quite

clear in winter. They probably resulted from medieval ploughing.



The ridge crossing the ride would be the headland where the plough was turned. They pre-date the creation of the deer park (note 3) before 1515.

**12. Holloway.** This deep cutting is another of the roads up to the common grazing on the hilltop. It was carved out by thousands of years of feet, hooves and wheels loosening the soil that was then washed away by rain. The road leading to Eling from the Hampstead Norreys to Hermitage road runs up a similar gully.

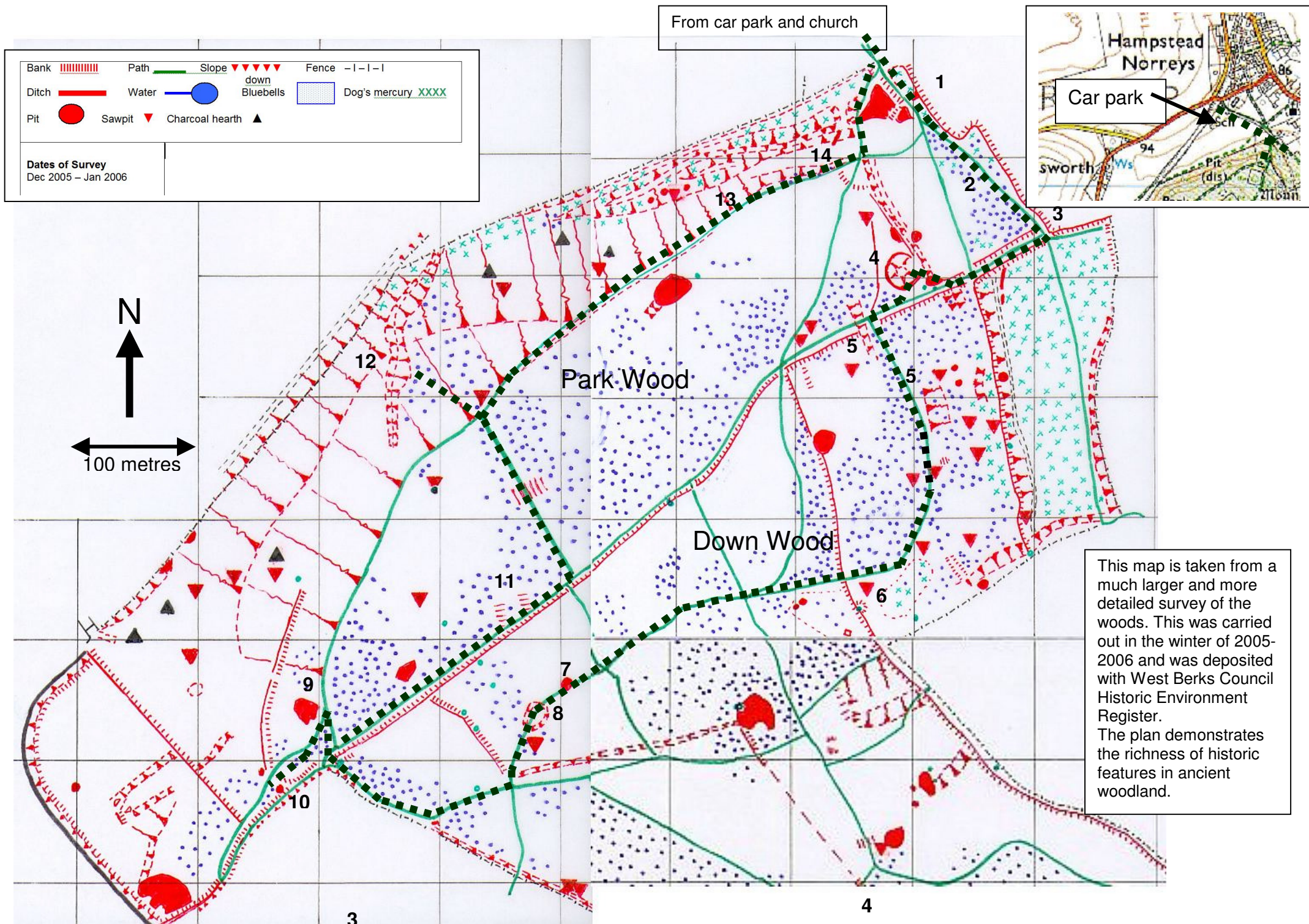
**13. Terraces.** Buried in the trees to the north of the path are a series of shallow terraces and another holloway leading to the chalk pit at Point 1.

**14. Rich flora.** This area is particularly rich in Ancient Woodland Indicator Species. Look for wood anemones, sweet woodruff, bluebells, wood speedwell, violets, sanicle, primroses, pignut, wood melick and many others.



Sweet woodruff & archangel







**The Dean** – the playing field in front of the Village Hall – gets its name from the Old English word *denu* which means 'a hollow'. An apt name and an indication of how long names can survive!

**St Mary's Church** is reputed to have Saxon work in the structure. It also has a preaching cross base near the door and an interesting cast iron tomb.

**Manor Farm** is without doubt on the site of a long series of ancient farms leading back to at least Saxon times and probably further. It was the centre of a large Saxon estate which originally included Hermitage parish. There are a number of similar pairings of manor and church along the Pang Valley.

**1. Chalk pits** were dug to sweeten the surrounding fields. Although the solid geology is alkaline chalk, the soils are usually acid clays and sands. If cereals are to grow the pH has to be raised to at least 7. Chalk was spread thickly and then ploughed in. There are many pits in the woods.

**2. Flower rich area.** Not every walk can be done in Spring but this area is worth coming to see. You will find bluebells, wood anemones, violets, dog's mercury, sanicle, moschatel, wood melick, yellow archangel and many others – all AWIS

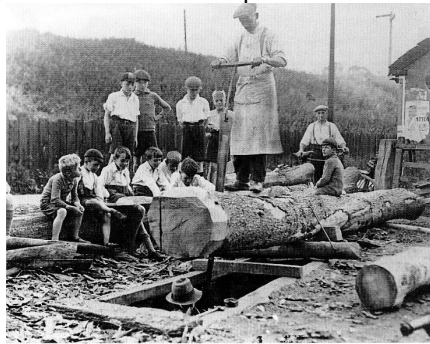
**3. Deer Park.** The Lord of the Manor was hauled up in front of Cardinal Wolsey in 1515 for enclosing 30 acres to make a park. Hence *Park Wood*. These banks are the boundary. The ditch is on the *inside* to stop animals getting *out*. Not on the *outside* to stop them getting *in* to eat the trees! The banks line an old road from the village to the common grazing on the hilltop.

**4. Bronze Age Barrow.** This mound was interpreted as a Norman Motte. Mottes were part of Norman castles

and had a stockade around the top. At most only 14 people can stand on the top and there is no sign of any outer earthworks. There are three other barrows within half a mile – all ploughed flat. The woodland has preserved this one. It dates from c.2500BC.

**5. Terraces.** These were formed by soil loosened by cultivation moving down hill to a boundary. They appear to be from the pre-wood period. There is a Roman farmstead to the south of the wood and they may be related to this. They may even be part of the Bronze Age landscape.

**6. Sawpit and bank.** Saw pits were trenches which allowed trees to be cut lengthways into planks and beams. They are mentioned in 16<sup>th</sup> century documents and seem to have gone out of use after World war 1. They should have been backfilled after use and some are difficult to spot.



**7. ? Potash pit.** This shallow circular pit may have been used to contain wood ash. Wood ash was soaked in water and the water became *lye*. This was a washing liquid and could be boiled with animal fat and lime to make soap. The residue was used as a flux to reduce the temperature at which sand melted when making glass. Different wood gave different coloured glass. Beech gave pink, elm gave blue.



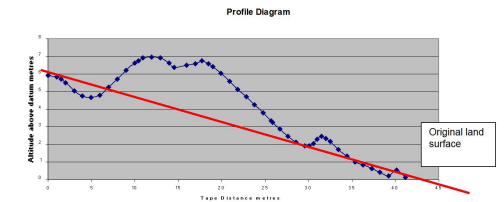
Manor Farm and church 1969  
With acknowledgements to Mrs Betts



St Mary's church



Hampstead Norreys Bronze Age Barrow  
At Point 4.



Probable 'Farmer's Lime Kiln' which went out of use before 1800. At Point 10.

