

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 and conducted walks – of which this is one.

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.westberkscountrysidesociety.org.uk

The Commons Agreement.

This was negotiated in 1974 between the owners of the Commons (Yattendon Estate) and Ashampstead Parish Council. It is registered with the Land Registry (LC/224003/74) and is binding on any future owners of all or part of the Commons.

Under the agreement those people who had registered Common Rights withdrew their registrations and the Estate agreed to allow the Parish Council, and thus all Ashampstead Parishioners, the right to cut and carry away furze and bushes from the Commons and to collect sticks and fallen branches for firewood, if not too large and for domestic use only. It also grants right of access to all parishioners to the whole area of the Commons.

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Forthcoming.



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

*We care for **YOUR** countryside*

‘A STROLL AROUND ASHAMPSTEAD COMMON’

**A walk around Ashampstead Common to look at its
Veteran Trees, Archaeology and Wildlife.**

**The walk can be started either near Childs Court Farm or at
the Buckhold Hill Car Park.**

About 2 miles or 3km.

**Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 159 – ‘Reading, Wokingham & Pangbourne’
will be useful**

**There is a short, modestly steep hill on this walk. Paths are
generally sound but may be muddy and uneven.**

A short history of the area.

For most of history an area's **soils** have governed the lives of people living on them. If the soils did not allow the growing of food and fuel and did not provide water no one could live on them. The **bedrock** of the Commons area is chalk. It outcrops in places and is buried under acid soils in others. Almost all of the soils are permeable so rain runs through them and there is very little surface water. The well at The Forge is 100 feet (30m) deep. Few crops, particularly cereals, will grow on acid soils although trees grow well. For these reasons trees are the natural vegetation of the area. For the last 6,000 years it has been grazed as **Pasture Woodland** with varying degrees of intensity. Only after liming had been introduced to sweeten the soils did arable farming become possible anywhere but on the valley sides and bottoms where the soils were chalky. Until populations became very large the land was managed in large estates. These were based near the rivers with their water and meadow land. The valley sides provided arable and the dry ridges provided the rough grazing and the essential woodland products. The parish of Ashampstead seems to have been split between an estate based at Lower Basildon and one based at Bradfield.

In 1235, seeing the woodland resource being swallowed by a growing population, major landowners persuaded the king to allow them to **enclose land on their manors** provided they left 'enough' to serve the needs of their tenants. This led to woodland being enclosed with banks and ditches and then managed intensively to produce timber and wood. It also led to a rise in the numbers of **deer parks**. The park on the Commons was built between 1235 and 1240 by the lord of Bradfield manor. He enclosed it with a bank with a ditch on the inside that we can trace for 3½ miles. A fence or a hedge ran along the top of the bank. Fallow deer were introduced, two park lodges and a pond were built and later an artificial rabbit warren was provided. In building the bank the remains of a **pottery industry** was buried on the western edge. It had thrived for 200 years selling pottery as far a field as Oxford and Reading.

The park seems to have gone out of use by 1600 and the area reverted to a **common** where manorial tenants could graze animals and gather firewood and bedding for animals. The tenants were responsible for starting the **pollard trees**. Pollards allow their branches to be harvested at intervals without killing the tree and at the same time allow animals to graze without eating the new shoots.

This history of use has developed the **very rich ground flora** that graces the woods today. On-going studies have identified well over 200 species to date.

Until County Councils were formed and took over road maintenance in 1889 Parish Councils looked after their roads. They got material from the cheapest places, the road side waste and the commons. This **quarrying** produced the many shallow pits close to roads. Chalk quarrying produced the deeper pits.

During **World War 2** the Commons were used by the army and remains of huts can be seen.

In 1972 the Rights of Common of individual properties were given up in favour of a **Commons Agreement** allowing all parishioners access to the woods and in 1996 a joint management group was set up. This encourages research and volunteer activity to enhance and maintain this beautiful area. One of the current activities is the '**Veteran Trees for the Future**' project.



Both Commons in 1761 – note how open it is.

Approximate route of the walk

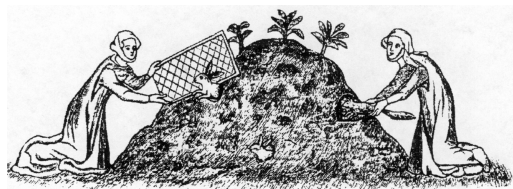


By 1877 grazing had decreased enough for trees to dominate.

7. 'Maggot's Hall' was really called 'St. Margaret's Hall'. It was one of the park keepers' houses for the deer park. It was sited to have a clear view of both roads. Poaching was a major problem for park owners and often led to fights. Animals and cultivation in the paddocks around the house destroyed the bluebells and introduced cowslips. The house was knocked down in the late 1800s.

8. World War 2 remains. During the build up to DDay in 1944 the woods were used to conceal troops. The soldiers lived under canvas but cook houses and ablution blocks were built for them. The foundations of these are sinking into the leaf mould in the same way the Roman villas sank. After only 60 years they are already 2 or 3cms down.

9. The Pillow Mound was an artificial rabbit warren. Rabbits were introduced by the Normans from Sicily in the 12th century. They were extremely valuable both for their flesh and for their fur which was used to line winter clothing. Initially the rabbits did not burrow and did not like our climate and warrens of tunnels under mounds were built for them. These mounds are a common feature of deer parks where the rabbits could be guarded from poachers by the park keepers. The rabbit skins were so valuable that organised gangs attacked warren houses to steal the furs and some houses were built like small forts. Catching and killing the rabbits was often a ladies job!



Medieval ladies catching rabbits from a Pillow Mound.

10. Buckhold Glade. A small glade is kept open on each of the three main soil types of the Common. This one is on chalky Ickneild Soils. It is cut and cleared by Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers in late summer and has a very rich flora. Over 90 different species were counted in one 4m x 4m square!



11. The Park Pale. This bank and ditch were built about 1235 and can be traced for 3½ miles – look at the soils and imagine the effort involved with primitive tools! There was a fence or a hedge along the bank and the ditch prevented the deer getting a clear jump at the barrier. A track followed the pale on the outside to allow the parker to maintain the fence. These tracks are the original 'Park Lanes' – even the London one!

12. Volunteers Glade is the second of our glades. It is on Winchester Soils which are fairly fertile – hence the beech trees. Again it is cut and cleared every year in late summer.

13. Long distance path. This path runs from the Pang Valley at Bradfield to The Ridgeway north of Aldworth with only one length of road walking. The road is sometimes busy and can be avoided using other paths through Coleridge Wood and across Haw Farm. The ancient pond –now dry- watered the deer and the commoners' cattle.



A 14th century 'Open Hall' house at Point 2



A veteran tree at Point 3



William's Glade (Point 5) in Spring



The 800 year old Yew at 6.



The Park Pale built about 1235. Point 11
The park is on the left of the picture.



A haloing team of Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers

Navigation Note. The path network on the Common can seem like a maze, but all the major paths are clearly defined and few of the minor ones are difficult to follow.

The paths around the Veteran Trees in the marked area at points 2 and 3 are the subject of a separate leaflet with a larger map and a copy of this is included.

The walk can be started from the Childs Court Farm end or from the small car park at Point 10.

1. Childs Court Farm was purpose built to serve the fields around it when they were enclosed about 1680. Before enclosure they had been managed as Open Fields divided into a complex pattern of acre and half-acre strips allocated to Manor Tenants. Tenancy of a number of strips allowed the holder to use the resources of the Common. Use of both arable fields and the Common were governed by the Manor Court. In the early 1900s it was one of the first farms to produce tuberculin-tested milk. The milk was sent daily to the Children's Hospital in London via the railway station at Hampstead Norreys. The farm buildings have now been converted to workshops that have brought employment to the countryside.

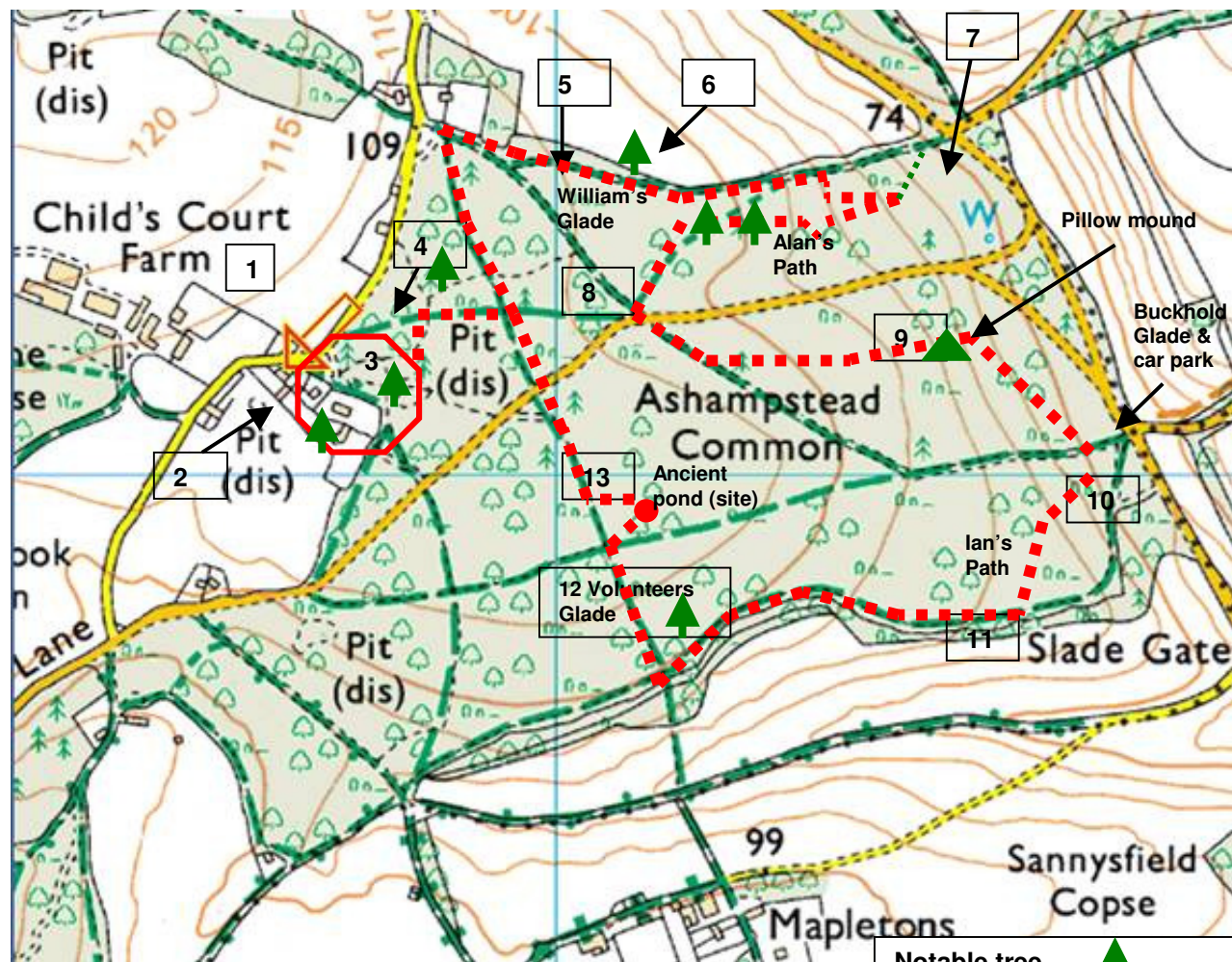
2. 14th Century Open Hall house. When 'The Cottage' was built it was open to the roof and heated by a fire on the floor in the middle. The smoke found its own way out!

3. Veteran Trees. This interesting collection is described in the accompanying leaflet. There are many other interesting trees scattered around the Commons. These are described in separate leaflets.

4. Old Road and Exotic Trees. This path was the original road to the farm from the east and south. It runs up a slight valley along the least gradient and is part of an old drove route from the grazing lands around Haw Farm. On a map of 1933 it is shown as a conifer-lined avenue. Looking beyond the path you will see a magnificent Wellingtonia and a Monkey Puzzle Tree. The Victorian owner, Dr Watney, tried to turn the Common into an arboretum by planting many exotic trees.

5. Williams Glade is named after the tractor driver who created it. It is one of the Common's most flower rich areas. The bluebells are particularly brilliant in the Spring. This richness indicates that the glade's soils have not been disturbed for centuries.

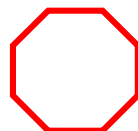
6. Ancient Yew. This is probably the oldest tree on the Commons. Yews are very difficult to age because they are multi-stemmed and grow very slowly. The age of this one has been estimated at 800 years. It is growing on the bank of the deer park pale (see page 2) and thus the bank must be at least 800 years old too.



Copied from the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of HMSO Licence No. AL100002091

N

½ km



See 'Seven Tree Stroll' leaflet

Notable tree



By way



Bridleway



Footpath



Access Path



Drivers use the car park entirely at their own risk