



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

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SUMMER
2026



Eurasian Beaver © wiki commons

Beavers are Back in Berkshire!

Last year ARK became aware of one beaver on the River Kennet. Over recent months, evidence now points to an increase of individual animals into double figures. ARK is the Rivers Trust for the Kennet and Pang catchments, we are a registered charity and run a variety of projects at a range of scales, taking a catchment-based approach to restore, monitor, educate and lobby to improve our rivers.

The surge in the beaver population is not part of a legal and planned release. It is thought to be due to 'beaver bombing' and potentially the natural extension from other nearby river catchments. 'Beaver bombing' is when this up-to-30kg herbivore is released illegally into the wild with no permissions and

landowners have not been consulted. This is clearly not the way to conduct a reintroduction. However, whether you are a beaver supporter or otherwise, that ship has sailed and we now need to move on and work together with beavers along our rivers. There are many positives we expect beavers to bring to the Kennet, but we are also being pro-active: increasing our knowledge; and gaining formal training to be able to legally and appropriately address any real issues using best practice. Both my colleague, Rupert, and I have our CL51 Class Beaver Licence from Natural England. This allows us to manage beaver dams and burrows, as well as giving general advice on beaver management.

We are in the early days of this beaver return and know that working in partnership with landowners, agencies and other organisations will be key.

Getting beavers officially recognised on the Kennet by Natural England was an important step that ARK has achieved. This means that, if landowners meet specific criteria, there is access to funding to protect trees. If you have heritage trees or trees of commercial value, protect them now! Welding mesh is recommended for individual trees. Woodland and groups of trees can be fenced.

Outcomes are better with good communication, shared expertise and working together, so ARK has brought together Beaver Trust; Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxon Wildlife Trust; Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and Beavers in Wiltshire Advisory Service. We will be regularly convening to ensure we have a strong catchment-wide understanding of beavers.

[Continued on page 5 >](#)

Inside this issue



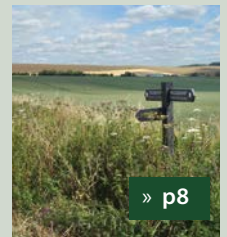
» p3



» p4



» p6



» p8

- 3 Volunteers: Task Roundup
- 4 Our Regional County Flowers
- 6 A Tree Planting Update
- 8 West into Old Berkshire near Ashbury

Plus lots more...

West Berkshire Countryside Society

Caring for our Countryside – Join Us and Help Make a Difference.

West Berkshire Countryside Society

The aim of the West Berkshire Countryside Society is to promote the understanding, appreciation and conservation of the West Berkshire countryside... furthering these objectives through practical conservation work, and guided walks and talks from local experts. It was formed in 2012 by amalgamating the Friends of the Pang, Kennet & Lambourn Valleys; the Bucklebury Heathland Conservation Group; the Pang Valley Conservation Volunteers & the Barn Owl Group.

Upstream is our quarterly publication designed to highlight conservation matters in West Berkshire and beyond and to publicise the activities of the Society.

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Conservation Volunteers' Task Diary

For outdoor events please wear suitable footwear and clothing. Most practical tasks start at 10am (so arrive earlier) and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided but bring a packed lunch and your own drinks. Task locations can be found by using the grid reference shown for that task or by the /// three-word code after each grid reference – the “What Three Words” listing for the task meeting point.

Date/Time	Venue	Details
July 2026		
Tue 7th July 10:00	Sheepdrove, Lambourn	Scrub clearance of a burial mound. Park near the red barn SU349 816 . Do not use sat nav guidance to locate this site ///connected.ranges.over
Tue 14th July 10:00	Ashampstead Common	Raking previously cut grass in woodland glades. Meet at car park SU587 751 ///swells.wrist.dandelions
Tue 21st July 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield	Continuing conservation management tasks. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield, SU584723 ///telephone.brink.crate
Fri 28th July 10:00	Grove Pit Common, Leckhampstead	Scrub clearance on this parish wildlife site. Access the common via the track which leaves the B4494 west at Cotswold Farm SU440 777 . Please leave your vehicles at the bottom of the track and walk up to the common. /// bossy.connected.tubes
August 2026		
Tue 4th Aug 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Ample parking at village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent, SU512 740 ///simmer.equipping.casual
Tue 11th Aug 10:00	Moor Copse Nature Reserve, Tidmarsh	Clearing vegetation and removing fallen trees. Park in the entrance to the Nature Reserve near Tidmarsh off the A340 at SU633 738 ///clays.reworked.speedily
Tue 18th Aug 10:00	To Be Confirmed	Please check the website for arrangements.
Tue 25th Aug 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield	Continuing conservation management tasks. Followed by BBQ. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield, SU584 723 ///telephone.brink.crate
September 2026		
Tue 1st Sept 10:00	Malt House, West Woodhay	Hedge laying and coppicing. Parking is on the entrance to the field off the W. Woodhay Rd or as directed on the day, SU407 639 ///belts.glorified.connects
Tue 8th Sept 10:00	Brightwalton – Dunmore Pond	Clearing invasive vegetation and dead ash to enhance wildlife diversity and public access at this ancient parish site. Parking at the Village Hall, SU426 793 ///globe.reverses.presses
Tue 15th Sept 10:00	Boxford	Brush clearing and tree lopping. Park in driveway of Mill House or in field opposite. Nearest postcode RG20 8DP. ///corner.thickened.tilting
Tue 22nd Sept 09:00	Ufton Court	Continuing conservation management tasks. Parking will be directed on the day, SU626 666 ///ooze.stall.tubes
Tue 29th Sept 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm, off Back Lane, Bradfield	Continuing conservation management tasks. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield, SU584 723 ///telephone.brink.crate



Volunteers: Task Roundup

Sheepdrove Celebrations
© Andy Hollox

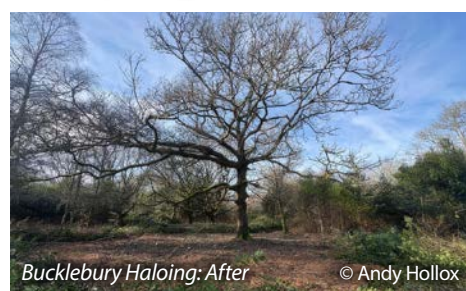
The Conservation Volunteers enjoyed a variety of tasks in a busy late winter period when woodland and hedgerow work must be completed before birds start nesting. This date creeps ever earlier as climate change impacts our countryside. In spring, the nature of tasks necessarily changes to construction and maintenance, often related to easing access along footpaths.

In mid-February we visited **Sheepdrove Organic Farm** and continued hedge laying along the boundary edge. This task has been going on for several years, but we were celebrating by lunchtime – it was finished! After that, we concentrated on clearing brash and creating log habitat piles. We now look forward to carrying out future tasks to help manage other important conservation areas on the farm.

On a lovely sunny day, a large group set to work haloing significant mature trees, mostly oaks, on **Bucklebury Common**. A great deal was achieved in the day, cutting away highly invasive holly from under the tree canopies to maximise the light received by the trunks and lower branches, and to reduce competition for nutrients.



Bucklebury Haloing: Before © Andy Hollox



Bucklebury Haloing: After © Andy Hollox

This spring we cleared the fence line of overhanging trees on the northern and eastern boundaries of **Winterbourne Wood** and coppiced several large hazel stools. Additionally, several thousand holly seedlings that were likely to take over an otherwise clear glade were removed from the southern section.

At **Rushall Manor Farm**, the group concentrated on making sure that footpaths for the popular Bluebell Walks were open and safe. Overhanging and obstructive trees, shrubs and bramble were cut back. Steps to the lane were recut and levelled to make access safer.

Our last visit this season to the **Malt House** brought another day's work continuing to lay the roadside hedge. Another 40 yards was laid, with essential aid from a team coppicing nearby for stakes and binders. A fantastic effort by everyone involved.



Working on the Malt House Hedge © Andy Hollox

In March on the **Sulham Estate** the team worked in streamside woodland. We checked oak trees that had been planted several years ago and re-staked where required. The surrounding fence was cleared of any fallen branches and repaired where necessary. Several large hazel stools were coppiced. These were protected from grazing damage using stakes and binders from the cut material.



Woodland Work at Sulham Farm © Nick Freeman

During our two visits to **Little Hidden Farm**, we completed laying a mixed species hedge which is already responding strongly with healthy regrowth. The finished job is a great sight and much appreciated. Work also took place in woodland where new rides are being created after felling following ash die back. Timber was piled for collection, and brash cleared and chipped to create a mulch that was spread around newly planted trees.

Our task at **Grovepit Common**, Leckhampstead, was continuing to remove dead elm trees, opening up a larger clearing into which some more saplings will be planted in the autumn to supplement those that are already establishing. In addition, two more hazel stools were coppiced and protected as part of the overall management objectives.

Two visits were made this spring to **Hosehill Lake** as we continue to improve the footpath around the perimeter. On the second visit, a special mention needs to go to one construction team who worked well over the usual time to complete repairs to a damaged boardwalk.

In May we spread two and half tons of mulch around about half a mile of new mixed species hedge that **Eling Estate** had planted over the winter. This should suppress competing vegetative growth and help to retain moisture to allow the hedge to become established.

Compiled by **Margery Slatter**, from **Task Leaders' Reports**

Our Regional County Flowers

We are all familiar with the traditional floral emblems of the countries of the United Kingdom, but did you know that each UK County has a flower emblem?

To commemorate the late Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee (2002), the plant conservation charity Plantlife asked the nation to choose a wildflower emblem to represent their county or city. The campaign sought to raise public awareness of our wildflowers, and the chosen plants symbolise the unique natural beauty and heritage of each county.



Berkshire – Loddon Lily (*Leucojum aestivum*)

The Loddon lily takes its name from the River Loddon, a tributary of the River Thames. Although nationally rare, Loddon lilies are locally abundant along the Thames between Oxford and Maidenhead. The pretty pendulous bell-shaped flowers appear in April and May. They are white with green spots to the petal tips. The fruits develop air pockets to aid dispersal along water courses, particularly during floods. Also known as 'summer snowflakes' or 'summer snowdrops', the Loddon lilies add interest and diversity along the Thames before the damp woodlands in which they thrive become dense with summer vegetation.

Loddon lilies (snowflakes) symbolise purity and hope.



Oxfordshire – Snake's-head Fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*)

The snake's head fritillary grows on unimproved flood meadows. Intolerant of grazing during the growing season, it is a nationally scarce plant but can be very abundant locally. In the past it was much more abundant, and baskets of flowers were picked to be sold at market. The chequered, purple, pink or white, bell-shaped flowers nod on thin stems resembling a snake's head, hence the plant's name. 'Fritillary' refers to the chequered pattern on the flower. Snake's-head fritillary blooms around mid to late April and can be seen in the floodplain meadows of the River Thames and its tributaries.

Fritillaries symbolise majesty, pride and power.



Buckinghamshire – Chiltern Gentian (*Gentianella germanica*)

This pretty gentian is rare in the UK, being largely confined to the nutrient-poor calcareous grassland of the Chilterns, although it is more widespread across continental Europe. The purple (sometimes white), trumpet-shaped flowers appear in branching clusters from mid-August to October forming patches of purple across the chalk grasslands. The Chiltern gentian is very similar to the more common autumn gentian. The main distinguishing features are the narrower leaves and the smaller, narrower flowers of the latter. Hybridisation of the two makes identification a challenge!

Gentians symbolise, passion, charm, loveliness and sweetness.



Hampshire – Dog Rose (*Rosa canina*)

Known in Shakespeare's time as eglantine, what this native rose lacks in perfume it makes up for in charm. (Use of this English name has pitfalls, however, since eglantine also refers to *Rosa rubiginosa* whose crushed foliage exudes a strong scent.) Dog rose is the most abundant and widespread of wild rose species, and the most variable. Its faintly powder-scented blooms can vary in colour from white to deep pink. Whilst usually about five metres in height, dog rose can scramble to the tops of tall trees. Other names for it are wild rose, briar (a prickly shrub), briar-rose, cat-rose, cock-bramble, dike-rose (i.e. hedge rose), hip-rose and pig-rose.

Flowering in our hedgerows in June and July, it is said to symbolise pleasure and pain.



Wiltshire – Burnt-tip Orchid (*Orchis ustulata*)

A white orchid with a deep crimson peak – the "burnt tip" – this plant is now critically endangered. Confined to a scattering of sites in southern England, especially the Wiltshire Downs where the largest colonies can be found, it was once more common than it is now. The burnt-tip orchid prefers short downland turf and occasionally strays into meadows. It flowers from May to June.

Continued from page 1.

So far, all the beaver sightings and signs on the Kennet have been in Berkshire. Beavers do not spend their time constantly felling large trees. They can often be at sites for quite some time before people realise they are present as their field signs can be far more subtle. Look out for branches cut at 45 degrees along the riverbanks and gnawing on trees. Beavers eat the bark not the wood. You may come across a pile of beaver sticks chewed



off at 45 degrees; this is a beaver feeding station. Beavers are partial to willow but 450+ plant species have been recorded in their diet.

ARK has responded swiftly to the return of these native and legally protected mammals to educate, support and work with fisheries, other riparian landowners such as councils, and those that work on the river. In February we ran a Beavers on the Kennet event, kindly hosted by Avington Fishery, Berkshire. We welcomed guest speakers from Beaver Trust, Natural England and Beavers in Wiltshire Advisory Service. Following on from this we organised a well-attended free CL51 Class Licence training day on the Kennet led by Natural England. Participants included ARK staff, river keepers and BBOWT staff. In March we held a packed



free community event in St John's Church, Newbury. Following our expert speakers was an excellent Q&A session.

We now need you, too! Please share your beaver sightings or signs with us and help to monitor our beaver population (it is always good to film and take clear photographs) and contact me at:

anna@kennetandpang.org

Anna Forbes, ARK
www.kennetandpang.org

Paper Volunteers

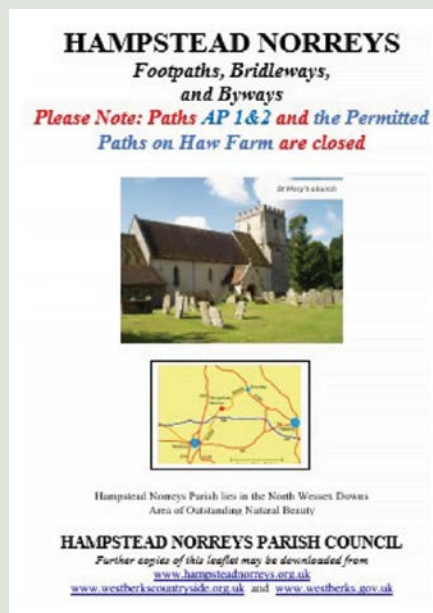
I joined the Pang Valley Countryside Project – now the West Berkshire Countryside Society – in the late 1990s. As well as joining in the physical tasks, I found myself giving talks and leading walks. It seemed a waste to discard the research I did for the walks and so I created simple leaflets which the project office printed for me to hand out to walkers. Later, these were added as free downloads to the WBCS's website.

Eventually I had to give up the physical stuff and when Yattendon Estates asked what could be done to stop walkers trespassing off Public Rights of Way, claiming ignorance of the path routes, Jill and I decided to try putting my leaflets in Yattendon

Shop for free distribution to walkers. We print them on our home computer and printer, and fund the ink and paper ourselves. This is our practical contribution to the Society's work.

We provide Parish Paths leaflets and Individual Walks leaflets for Yattendon, Frilsham, Ashampstead and Hampstead Norreys parishes. Yattendon Shop kindly displays these in a rack next to the Post Office counter and we try to refill the rack once a week.

It has been a considerable success and keeps me involved. To date we have distributed over 1500 leaflets, thus helping to introduce more people to the joys of our area.



After all, the Society's Constitution requires us to 'introduce people to the countryside'.

Dick Greenaway



Don't forget our website!
www.westberkscountryside.org.uk



A Tree Planting Update – and, yes, we still need your help!

An update covering some of the group's tree planting activities over the last two years and some comments on the UK's recent planting efforts.

In the Spring 2025 edition of Upstream we covered the planting season 24/25 when the group planted 29 trees on two small sites – Hillgreen and Winterbourne. This season we have continued to plant in these two locations, as well as at a new site – Grovepit Common, Leckhampstead.

With the kind permission of the parish council, and after the group cleared more fallen dead elm and some invasive bramble, we planted another 63 trees at the Hillgreen site. There may be room to plant a few more later this year, but the planting here is now almost complete.

At our second location in Winterbourne, and with the kind permission of the landowner, we planted another 12 trees. With plans to plant more next November we hope to be able to report successful establishment and further planting having taken place.

And again, with the kind agreement of the parish council, we started planting at our latest site, Grovepit Common, following the removal of many dead elms. We were able plant 32 trees. With plans to remove more dead elms, we will be able to plant more trees later in the year.

In all, over the last two seasons, the group has planted 136 trees. These have been grown or purchased and then donated by one of our regular volunteers. Stakes from coppicing on various sites and recycled tree guards are used to help them get established. Despite last year's drought all are doing well. And of course, we will continue to monitor them and carry out any necessary maintenance over the next few of years.

Looking at the bigger picture, for many years the UK has consistently failed to meet its own planting targets. In the last four years just 45% of its targets have been met, despite announcing the creation of three new national forests. Any progress is likely to be held back by insufficient funding, lack of clear action plans, a shortage of skilled workers and limited domestic tree production. Clearly, we still need to do more to fight climate change and reverse biodiversity loss. Tree planting is one of the ways we can help to do this.

Suitable sites for planting trees do not have to be large scale to make a difference. A field corner, the edge strip to a recreation ground, the surrounds of a car park, or small areas of a local green space might accommodate a few trees. These trees could provide shelter, privacy to neighbouring houses and beauty in the landscape as well as increasing



Planting at Hillgreen, near Peasemore © Andy Hollox



Planting at Grovepit Common © Andy Hollox

biodiversity and helping to reduce the effects of climate change.

Community groups, charities and other not-for-profit organisations are often able to apply for and obtain free trees and hedging shrubs from local and national donors. We can help you with this process, if you are interested, and provide advice on tree planting and maintenance. We may be able to help with site clearance and preparation, and even the planting!

We are always looking for new sites for trees. So, if you have a location and would like to talk about planting trees or the creation of a new hedge, please contact the Society.

Terry Davis



Take Part in the Big Butterfly Count

The Big Butterfly Count 2026 will take place from 17th July to 9th August, inviting participants across the UK to spend 15 minutes counting butterflies to help monitor their populations.

Launched in 2010, it has become the world's largest butterfly survey. The survey helps scientists monitor trends, understand the effects of climate change, and plan conservation strategies for butterflies and other wildlife.

www.bigbutterflycount.butterfly-conservation.org

Remembering Chris Genge

During Chris's career as a teacher, his patient and supportive nature was appreciated by generations of children. In retirement, he became a stalwart of the West Berkshire Countryside Society. Joining in May 2012, his dedication and commitment to the Society for many years was a lynchpin in creating today's vibrant organisation and its valued contribution to the conservation of the West Berkshire countryside.

Chris was a friend who was cheerful, knowledgeable and helpful.



Chris in H&S Role

© Andy Hollox

'Conservation Tuesdays' are about lots of things: certainly, they are about the task and the outdoor exercise. But there is more – it's about the chat. The Irish have the best word for it, "the craic", and Chris was good at it. Chris took 'new' Tuesday volunteers under his wing. He used all the skills he had developed as a teacher to settle them in, want to come back a second time and enjoy the day. But Chris was even more than that – he kept us safe. He was, after all, 'Mr Risk Assessment Man'; he was for many years the 'Tools Man'; and he was the 'Annual BBQ'. But we must not forget Ruth, Chris's wife, without whose support very little of this could have happened.

Chris's generosity of time and expertise was fundamental to creating the feeling of companionship and camaraderie that we all enjoy. His most memorable phrase is 'It's about enjoying what we do.'



Man and Van

© Tony McDonald

Chris was also active in many other community groups in the Hermitage area.

Chris coped with Parkinson's with great fortitude and good humour. Even when his illness had started to take its effect, he made every effort to make it out on a Tuesday. His knowledge, willingness to help everyone and his kind nature will be very much missed.

Tuesdays will not seem quite the same again.

Tony McDonald with considerable input from John Salmon and Mike Pollard

Dates for your Diary



Thurs 18th June 9:15pm and Wed 8th July 9.15pm (Joint meeting with NDOC)

Nightjars – a short walk on Bucklebury Common. Join Society members to look for and hear these summer visitors to the heathland. Meet in the car park off The Common, closest to Chapel Row **SU560 692** ///runner.rotate.musically

Walks with Butterfly Conservation www.upperthames-butterflies.org.uk/event_calendar



Saturday, 4th July, at 10:30am

Silchester Common and Pamber Forest

A relaxed walk around this heathland and forested area. Will we manage to find Silver-washed Fritillary and Silver-studded Blue amongst the summer butterflies?



Tuesday, 28th July, at 10.30am

Greenham Common

Search for the increasingly elusive Grayling and other summer butterflies.



Sunday 2nd August

Seven Barrows, Lambourn

A gentle amble around to enjoy its summer butterflies including Chalk Hill Blue.



Thursday, 20th August, at 10:30am

Lardon Chase NT

A stroll to enjoy a variety of downland butterflies, including a chance to see Adonis Blue.

West into Old Berkshire near Ashbury

Approximately 6 miles (9.5k). Tracks, field paths and minor lanes. Some paths can be muddy and slippery after rain. Park on The Ridgeway a mile southeast of Ashbury on the B4000 at SU273 843 //lure.beanbag.formation. Refreshments in Ashbury and nearby villages. OS Explorer Map 170

Walk northeast along The Ridgeway, over the first crossing of tracks, passing the long barrow on your left.

1. The Ridgeway ancient track is usually dry in summer, but it is said that travellers of old took a great risk when they set out in winter along the route. After prolonged rain the mud could lie deep enough to trap or even drown the unwary!



© Geograph – Des Blenkinsopp

2. Wayland's Smithy is a fine long barrow built over 5,000 years ago as a burial chamber. The entrance to the grave is flanked by 3m high sarsen stones probably dragged here from the Marlborough Downs. Wayland was a mythical Saxon blacksmith. Local legend states that if a horse and a coin are left here overnight, the horse will be re-shod by morning.

Ignore any joining paths (R and L), turning right at the next crossing of tracks. Follow the track past woodland strips on the right and then more woodland on the left.

3. Look out for downland wildlife! Larger animals seen all year round are hares and deer. Of the birds, skylarks and meadow pipits singing overhead and corn buntings singing from fence posts are common summer sounds.

At the break between the woodland to your left bear right across arable fields heading to the left of the woods on the far horizon. After the first field, cross a

bridleway (about 100m left of a solitary hawthorn bush). After a second large field cross a track with an ageing signpost. After yet another field you come to a fence. Go through the gate in the corner of the field. Bear left keeping the first coombe (dry valley) to your right, shortly bearing half right to follow the ridge downhill to the gate by the road.

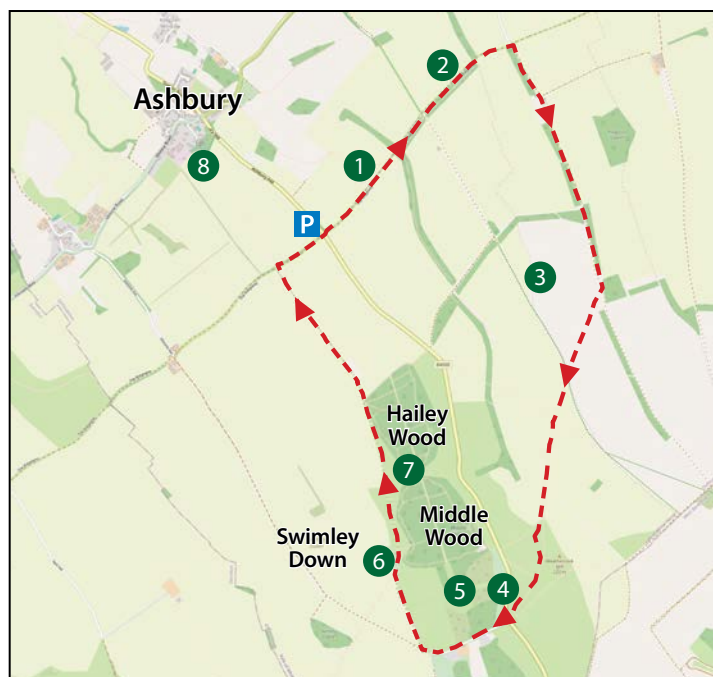
4. In the fields nearby are numerous examples of 'grey wethers' – sarsen stones thought to resemble sheep lying in pasture. These are very hard and heavy remnants of a layer of sandstone that once covered the chalk. They are locally abundant and have often been used as building material.

Cross the road to walk down the minor road opposite keeping Ashdown House to your right.



5. Ashdown House, now owned by the National Trust, was built of chalk blocks in the 17th century by the 1st Earl Craven. He is said to have chosen this isolated site so that Elizabeth of Bohemia, sister to Charles 1, could escape from plague-ridden London. Elizabeth unfortunately died without ever seeing the house finished.

As the track turns left, carry straight on through the



gateway and then round to the right. Walk up the field edge track through two gates keeping Alfred's Castle to your left.



© Geograph – Brian Robert Marshall

6. The Iron Age hillfort of Alfred's Castle, built about 2,500 years ago, is possibly close to the site of the battle of Ashdown in 871 AD. This battle fought and won by the Saxons led by King Ethelred and his brother, later to be King Alfred, was against the Danes. These invaders had a stronghold at Reading and used The Ridgeway as a route to raid the surrounding countryside.

7. The path passes through flower rich meadows typical of chalk downland with many flowers and insects in the summer.



© Geograph – Steve Daniels

After the 2nd gate, the path takes the middle of two fields and then follows the fence line on the left. At the end of this field go through the gate and continue in the same direction, ignoring any paths or tracks, to The Ridgeway.

8. A pleasant visit could be made to the village of Ashbury. The spring line village has a church built primarily of local chalk blocks, like many of the cottages, and a lovely Norman south door. Ashbury used to have watercress beds fed by the pure water from the chalk springs.

Turn right along The Ridgeway and return to the start after 400m.

Margery Slatter

Many more interesting local walks are available on our website: www.westberkscountryside.org.uk