



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 109
AUTUMN
2024

The State of West Berkshire's Birds

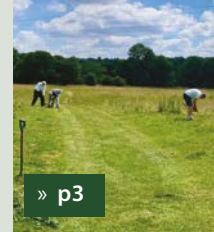
It is now 13 years since fieldwork for the last Berkshire bird atlas was completed. The breeding distribution elements of this survey, repeating an earlier project in the late 1980s, gave a clear picture of the changing fortunes of our breeding bird species. Fieldwork and recording continue to monitor our local bird populations.

At first sight, Berkshire does not seem an attractive place for birds and birdwatching. It is a small inland county and is the second smallest (by area) of the non-metropolitan counties in England. The east of the county is densely populated, while much of the west is intensively farmed. However, the county's bird list is notably longer than adjacent counties, with 318 species reported (January 2023), compared to 304 in Oxfordshire and 297 in Buckinghamshire. Furthermore, when

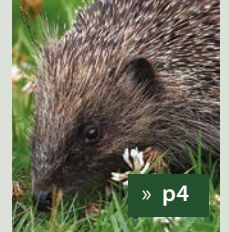
the results of the last Berkshire bird atlas were compared with the results in adjoining counties, it appeared that Berkshire retained strongholds of several declining species largely lost elsewhere. (See berksoc.org.uk/county-atlas/thames-and-chilterns-atlas)

What is the reason for this? Firstly, Berkshire has a good variety of habitats. In West Berkshire, this includes heathland, largely missing from neighbouring counties to the north. The restoration of heathlands, like Greenham Common in the 1990s, has provided habitat for typical heathland birds, such as woodlark, nightjar, Dartford warbler and woodcock that are largely absent in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. The high tops of the Berkshire Downs have a variety of habitat, including areas set aside as racehorse gallops and the ancient drove roads set in wide uncultivated corridors. This varied landscape provides a refuge for some

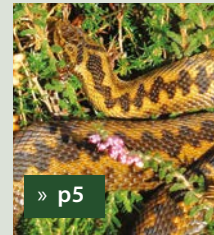
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of our most depleted farmland birds, including corn bunting, yellowhammer, linnet and grey partridge. Gravel extraction in the Kennet Valley has created new habitats that support wetland birds, including little ringed plover, oystercatcher, common tern, Cetti's warbler and gadwall.

However, there is still concern that the effects of the agricultural changes of the last 100 years have not been reversed. Among the birds of the wider countryside that still seem to be in decline are grey partridge and lapwing, which may follow red-backed shrike, wryneck, Hawfinch, redpoll, wood warbler, tree sparrow, whinchat and wheatear into extinction locally; while cuckoo, turtle dove, lesser spotted woodpecker, willow tit, spotted flycatcher and tree pipit are either extremely scarce or possibly extinct in our area.

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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 and usually finish around 3pm, unless otherwise stated, so bring a packed lunch. However, we are more than happy to accept any time you can spare! All tools are provided. A map of each task location can be found on the website diary page by clicking on the grid reference shown for that task. The three-word code after each grid reference is the "What Three Words" listing for the task meeting point.

Date/Time	Venue	Details
October 2024		
Tue 1st Oct 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm	Woodland management. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield. SU584 723 telephone.brink.crate
Tue 8th Oct 10:00	Malt House, West Woodhay	Hedge laying and coppicing. Parking is on the track off the W. Woodhay Rd. SU404 637 belts.glorified.connects
Tue 15th Oct 10:00	Bucklebury Common	Maintaining important heathland habitats. Meet at the Crossroads. SU556 961 taskbar.flagpole.sensual
Tue 22nd Oct 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Woodland and butterfly habitat management on this parish wildlife site. Parking at village hall – through double gates off Pinewood Crescent. SU512 740 simmer.equipping.casual
Tues 29th Oct 10:00	Padworth Common	Scrub control on this BBOWT heathland reserve. Parking at the reserve. SU619 648 bigger.restores.highlighted
November 2024		
Tue 5th Nov 10:00	Sheepdrove, Lambourn	Continue hedge laying and maintaining previous length of hedge. Park near the red barn. Do not use sat nav guidance to locate this site. SU349 816 connected.ranges.over
Tue 12th Nov 10:00	Greyfield Wood, Beenham	Woodland management with the local management group. Park in the woodland car park along the track at SU581 689 skate.plans.whizzing
Tue 19th Nov 10:00	Boxford Water Meadows	Brush clearing and tree lopping. Park along Westbrook Lane and in the site entrance in Boxford village. SU426 717 rectangular.maybe.scatter
Tue 26th Nov 10:00	Grovepit Common, Leckhampstead	Scrub clearance on this parish wildlife site. Access via the track which leaves the B4494 west at Cotswold Farm. Please leave your vehicles at the bottom of the track and walk up to the common. SU440 777 bossy.connected.tubes
December 2024		
Tue 3rd Dec 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm	Woodland management. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield. SU584 723 telephone.brink.crate
Tue 10th Dec 10:00	Bucklebury Meadows	Working on hedges around the meadows behind the pub in Upper Bucklebury. Park in Morton's Lane. SU543 686 chuckling.notion.regaining
Tue 17th Dec 10:00	Ashampstead Common	Haloing work on the special trees. Park at the Common entrance just past The Cottage along Sucks Lane, Ashampstead RG8 8QT. SU576 751 nuzzling.pegs.afford



Volunteers: Task Roundup

In this summer quarter, the volunteers have carried out a variety of environmental maintenance activities and some tasks to create habitat and infrastructure. Several days have concentrated on the control of both native and non-native invasive plants.

Bramble is a native species which is of great value to wildlife, but which can become invasive if allowed to spread throughout an area and across paths. Removing or controlling some of it allows other, less competitive plants to flourish, and maintains public access. One visit to **Rushall Manor Farm** helped to clear bramble from an area where spring flowers bloom extensively in woodland which is also a popular den-building space for visiting youngsters. Laurel and rhododendron within the area was also brought under control.

At **Furze Hill**, bramble threatens to take over the wildflower meadow. Extensive clumps and about half the grassed area were successfully cleared to allow the meadow plants to flourish. Bracken was cleared from the butterfly 'larder' and path edges on a previous visit.



Toad in Furze Hill Meadow © Margery Slatter

Bracken clearance continues to feature in the task diary on several sites, where its vigour is gradually being reduced to prevent it taking over glades and grassland. Anecdotally, one volunteer was heard to say that he has been bracken bashing at **Holt Lodge, Kintbury** for several decades... We don't seem to have it licked yet despite our best efforts on our annual visit!

After several years of successfully clearing the highly invasive rhododendron from the slopes of **Grimsbury Castle**, we started to remove a number of strips along Slanting Hill. It's so much easier to see what to cut when the plant is showing its lovely purple flowers! A great deal was achieved in the two days spent here in removing this poisonous and light-excluding non-native shrub.

We continued to pull ragwort from the water meadow SSSI at **Sulham Home Farm** with two days now devoted to the task. Many builders' bags full of ragwort were removed on both days despite the first being extremely hot and the second quite wet. Several volunteers commented on the surprisingly few cinnabar moth caterpillars to be seen on the plants, but there is plenty left should moth numbers improve later in the season. Since we never pull it all, there are still many plants available to all the insects that feed on the flowers and leaves.

At **Rushall Manor Farm** volunteers reconstructed the woodland amphitheatre, which provides a well-used seating and performance space for school visits to the farm, and cleared the surrounding paths to give safe and easier access for groups using the area.



Amphitheatre Seating, Rushall © Andy Hollox

Our task at the **Nature Discovery Centre** in Thatcham, on behalf of BBOWT, was to help create a new wildflower meadow which can be used by local school children to get closer to nature by studying the flora and fauna. Our volunteers spent a day cutting down tall

grass in a small, enclosed area and then taking out sections of turf to expose the soil into which a mix of wildflowers will be sown.



Grass Clearance, Thatcham © Debby Reynolds

Once again, the glades on **Ashampstead Common** were raked clear of cut grass in order to prevent additional nutrients from reaching the soil (which encourages aggressive species to thrive and out-compete a wider diversity of grassland plants). We are grateful to Yattendon Estates for enabling this by cutting the grass in all three glades.



Raking Up, Ashampstead Common © Dave Rylance

Impressively, the whole length of the track and the side paths of **Grovepit Common** were cut back and cleared to ease access to this local parish site. All the vegetation has had great growing conditions this year, so there was plenty to do on a very hot day. A similar task on the **Eling Way** between Hampstead Norreys and Hermitage ensures that this very popular route remains accessible to all its users and helps to maintain the diversity of low-growing flowers and plants along the path's edges.

Compiled by **Margery Slatter**, with thanks to the **Task Leaders**

Where have all the hedgehogs gone?



Hedgehogs are one of our most distinctive and loved mammals. They have been in existence for over 15 million years - but they are in trouble. With numbers in sharp decline over recent years, it is estimated that up to 75% of Britain's rural hedgehogs have been lost in the last 20 years.

Hedgehogs can be found in wooded areas, pastures, parks and gardens throughout the UK. Their dense covering of spines offers good protection when disturbed, rolled up in a tight ball covering the head and soft underside. They are solitary, non-territorial animals, most active on nights after heavy rainfall when they eat slugs, snails, beetles and earthworms. In summer they shelter during the day in temporary nests of leaves, moss and grass. By October and November, hedgehogs have dramatically put on weight in preparation for their hibernation in nests typically situated under hedgerows, in old rabbit burrows, underneath compost heaps or even in garden sheds.



Purley Sustainability Group are keen to help in creating a local environment where these lovely creatures can thrive. Everything we can do to help them will boost their numbers and contribute towards the survival of the species.

Top 10 facts about hedgehogs

1. They can live up to 10 years but over half die within their first year.
2. They are night owls who don't like the heat.
3. They can travel around a mile every night looking for food. They need gaps in fences and walls to allow them to travel freely.
4. They will often travel the same route each night.
5. They are sociable creatures.
6. They are lactose intolerant.
7. They are carnivores.
8. They may need spectacles but make up for their bad eyesight with an excellent sense of smell and hearing.
9. They are speedy little things.
10. If you see a hedgehog out during the day, it is probably in trouble, and you will need to contact a wildlife centre.

The closest rescue centre to Purley on Thames is Oxfordshire Wildlife Centre based in Blewbury. Their 24-hour Wildlife Helpline is 07549 322464. They also have lots of useful information about hedgehogs and other wildlife on their website www.oxfordshirewildliferescue.com

Finally, please be careful when you are cutting your grass, especially when using a strimmer. Hundreds of hedgehogs are killed or injured by these machines every year.

We hope that you will enjoy having these animals in your garden and help with their survival.

Encouraging and protecting hedgehogs in your garden

- Do leave some area of wilderness where they can find insects
- Do put out water for drinking
- Do put out a bowl of dog food or meaty cat food around dusk
- Do install a hedgehog house in a quiet part of the garden
- Do create a "hedgehog highway" in and out of your garden
- Don't put out bread and milk
- Don't pick up fit hedgehogs
- Don't leave black sacks or netting lying around
- Don't use slug pellets or other chemicals: there are safer alternatives on the market
- Don't fork over compost heaps or light a bonfire before checking for hedgehogs
- Don't spray hedgehogs for fleas. Hedgehog fleas do not live on dogs, cats, humans or inside houses



See www.purleysustainability.co.uk/projects/hedgehogs for further information and how you can report your hedgehog sightings.

Alison Hallowell and Graham Tyler
Purley Sustainability Group



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



Adder Tunnels at Greenham

Recent scientific studies suggest that only a few of the larger populations of adders could be left in England in 10 years' time. As small groups are at greater risk, the Adder Connections project aims to form a larger local population with a wider mix of genetics to make them more resistant to potential threats such as disease. Greenham and Crookham Commons are home to two distinct populations of adders. After attaching radio tags to some of the adders to track their movements, the land management team at Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) discovered that the groups were not mixing.

Results showed that the snakes were unable to cross Old Thornford Road which divides the commons. The adders are at some points only a matter of metres apart, but they may as well be five hundred miles away! So, two tunnels have been created underneath the road to encourage intermixing. The snake tunnels are the first of their kind in the UK, with pebbles at the bottom to aid movement and metal fencing to guide the snakes and other small creatures through the tunnels and away from the dangers of the road. Radio tracking and camera traps will be used to monitor the tunnels to see if the populations are mixing.



The results will have significant implications for similar projects across the country, particularly where species fragmentation is an issue.

Debbie Lewis, Head of Ecology at BBOWT, spoke to the importance of this project: 'Adders are amazing creatures. They are the UK's only venomous snakes and can live up to 30 years, but because they are naturally cautious of humans they are rarely spotted. We know that loss and fragmentation of their habitats – and even climate change – is having a huge impact on adder numbers, and it's sad to say that this incredible creature could be extinct from our counties in the next few decades if something isn't done to help them. Most have already disappeared from Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, with this area of Berkshire being a vital stronghold for them. New and innovative thinking is needed to combat the current crisis. We hope to contribute to the wider understanding of how we can better



Adders are one of our three native snake species and are most often found on heaths, moors and coastal areas. Recent population declines, especially in central England, mean they are of major conservation concern.

Adders are identified by a dark, continuous 'zig-zag' stripe along the back, the overall colour varying from grey-white in the male to shades of brown or copper in the female. Young adders are copper, light brown or reddish, with darker brown markings. Completely black (melanistic) forms occur in some areas. Adders can grow to around 60cm in length.

Mating takes place in April/May and females incubate their eggs internally, giving birth to around 6 to 20 live young in August or September. Adders feed largely on small rodents and lizards. They hibernate from around October to February, depending on local conditions. Their main predators include crows, buzzards and game birds.

Adders are protected by law in Great Britain. It is illegal to intentionally kill or injure adders, or to trade in them.

encourage mixing among adder communities.'

A major threat to adders is human interference, both through deliberate persecution and disturbance of their nesting sites. The Trust asks that visitors do not seek out adders on their reserves but enjoy them from a distance as this is safer for visitors, adders and pets.

Logan Walker, BBOWT



BIOCHAR: a sustainable, natural soil ameliorant (Part 2)

Charcoal has many different applications. The raw product is used in filtration as a water purifier, for absorbing odours, or as insulation in buildings and building materials. Its absorptive quality makes it suitable as a method of removing pollutants from watercourses. Charcoal is also used as an aid to animal digestion: charcoal biscuits appear on the cheese boards of fancy restaurants because they help with digestion. If the quality of the product is not of a high standard, the charcoal can be used in a barbecue. However, I am more interested in its use as the soil ameliorant known as Biochar, which has a retail value of about £20 for 5kg, so it is worthwhile making it yourself.



I was able to make a reasonable quantity of charcoal from an open fire. Firstly, I graded the wood, separating the twigs for kindling from the branches and put them in piles. You need a lot of kindling, because it must be added to draw flames away from the thicker wood as soon as ash starts to cover the surface. Ash is a sign that too much oxygen is getting to the heap. Then I laid a couple of layers of quite tightly packed branches onto a couple of sheets of corrugated iron, put on rolled up newspaper and kindling, and started the fire. When the kindling began to form ash, I knocked it back with a fork, added more branches, and then some more kindling on top, continuing until I ran out of fuel, finishing with

kindling on the top layer to keep the oxygen out. When I was satisfied that the wood had turned to charcoal, I doused the fire with water to open up the pores within it. The next morning, when the charcoal was cold and excess water drained away, I shovelled it up into a plastic bin, ready to convert it into Biochar.

Burning in a cone shaped pit is also effective because the gasses are sucked up from the base in a vortex and get burnt off at the surface yielding hardly any smoke. Some people dig a trench for the fire where they want to grow plants. They activate the charcoal by adding compost and manure. This probably reflects how native South Americans may have discovered how nutrient-poor Amazonian soils could be made fertile.

Activating (or inoculating) the charcoal is essential before it can be used as a soil ameliorant. If you were to add it to the plant beds in its raw state, it would absorb nutrients and microorganisms from the soil, impoverishing your plants in the process. Some people crush the charcoal to make finer particles, but I prefer them ungraded so that they can support different sorts of microorganisms and hold air and water as needed.

There are several ways of activating charcoal. It can be soaked in a compost tea. This is the quickest method, but requires equipment, such as aeration pumps, to prevent anaerobic bacteria from forming. The charcoal can be added in layers to your compost heap where the pieces will take up nutrients and become home to colonies of fungal mycorrhiza and bacteria. It is this self-sustaining ecosystem that will feed your crops and garden plants when the compost is spread on the beds.

Another method is to mix the charcoal in a tub with a source of nutrients. I used chicken manure for nitrates, phosphates,



Fungal mycelia

© Wikimedia Commons

magnesium and trace elements, and human urine for added liquid nitrates. If this sounds distasteful to you, it is not essential, but urine is sterile and, once absorbed, the Biochar can be handled confidently. I also added leaf mould to supply the micro-organisms. The mix is then left to 'culture' for a couple of weeks before use.

Once activated, Biochar can be added directly to the top 30cm of soil to about 10% by volume. This is where the root zone is, so plants will benefit straight away. In a no-dig system, the Biochar can be added to the surface and will gradually be incorporated into the soil by worms. I have now started to use Biochar as a proportion of my home-made potting compost to lighten the mix. It is incorporated into the soil when the seedlings are planted out. I also intend to incorporate Biochar into the mix used for pot plants as I believe that the plants will be better supplied with nutrients over the long term and be less susceptible to drying out and waterlogging.

It is good to know that this 7000-year-old technology is being rediscovered to solve some of today's problems of soil fertility and atmospheric carbon.

Charles Gilchrist



Applying Biochar

© Wikimedia Commons



Tetrads	Occupied	Confirmed
2008/11	60	30
1987/9	137	38
CBC/BBS trend UK	-50%	

Our warming climate is also having an impact. A clear trend is emerging nationally that the range of some species is retreating northwards, while others are spreading from the south. In the first instance, meadow pipit and willow warbler are two breeding species that have largely disappeared from West Berkshire in the last two decades, while firecrest (a close relative



Little Egrets © Neil Bucknell

of the familiar goldcrest) has spread north from Hampshire, and three species of egret (white heron-like birds that 50 years ago would only be seen on a trip to the Mediterranean) now occur regularly. Our breeding populations of birds like stonechat and Dartford warbler, that are vulnerable to hard winters, appear to be thriving and expanding in the absence of any such winters in recent decades.

There are grounds for hope. Farmers and landowners are finding that high-inputs to drive up yields from marginal land are often unprofitable and, with the advent of biodiversity net gain schemes whereby income can be derived from more wildlife-friendly land management, they now have an incentive to pursue other regimes. The Berkshire unitary authorities are



Willow Warbler © Neil Bucknell

currently formulating a Local Nature Recovery Strategy to provide a policy framework setting out priorities for action to restore nature locally. The Berkshire Ornithological Club is one organisation participating in the process. Other landowners are also taking a positive approach – Newbury Racecourse, for example, is allowing the Newbury District Ornithological Club to maintain a hide and carry out management work at its site at Lower Farm Gravel Pit.

To monitor the status of our breeding and wintering birds, the British Trust for Ornithology is now planning another national bird atlas, so if volunteers can be found to repeat the last survey, we may have the opportunity of mapping the changing fortunes of our resident and wintering birds over 20 years, and those of our breeding species over a 40- year period. (See berksoc.org.uk/county-atlas).

Neil Bucknell
Berkshire Ornithological Club

Peter Trentham

It is with sadness that we report the death of our founder, Peter Trentham, on 14th June 2024. In the 1980s and early 1990s a series of severe droughts and over abstraction had reduced the River Pang to a dry ditch upstream of Stanford Dingley. Peter organised a group of Pang Valley Parish Councils in a campaign to restore the stream. Together with a group of farmers and landowners, Peter founded The Pang Valley Project as part of his ongoing concerns over the use of water in the Pang. Under his chairmanship he built a solid foundation for the organisation we have today: the West Berkshire Countryside Society.



Date for your Diary

2.00pm Sun 13th October

A 2-mile Woodland Walk with Charles Gilchrist, near Hermitage

Starting and finishing at the small woodland car park opposite the triangular junction of Grimsby Castle and Marlston Road in Hermitage woods.

SU512724 prefect.inhaler.balance

Further parking towards Hermitage. See autumn colour in the mixed deciduous and coniferous plantations; fruit, ferns, and fungi (all weather dependent). Please dress appropriately.

In the Far South – Walbury Hill and Combe

8.5k (5 miles). Steep sections both up and down. Short sections on quiet lanes. The walk starts from the car park below Walbury Hill at SU38022 61570 hood.prop.yield. OS Explorer Map 158. Refreshments in nearby villages.

Take the stony track that leads up and over Walbury Hill to the west, along the Wayfarer's Walk.

1. Walbury Hill, at 297m, is the highest point in Southeastern England. There are superb views in all directions. Ringed by the ditch and bank fortifications of an Iron Age hillfort, the 82-acre enclosure at the summit is the largest of any hillfort in Berkshire.

Descending through the fort's entrance ramparts, cross the road and follow the track over Gallows Down.

2. On Gallows Down, Inkpen Long Barrow and Combe Gibbet are further reminders of the past. Inkpen Long Barrow, constructed as an earthen mound 65m in length with flanking ditches, is a funerary monument dating from the Early and Middle Neolithic periods (3400-2400 BCE). It is one of the oldest man-made features visible in the present landscape. On its mound is 4m-high Combe Gibbet, a replacement for the original structure from which the bodies of an adulterous couple, George Broomham and Dorothy Newman, were hung after they were found guilty of the murder of George's wife and son. Hanged in Winchester in 1676,



© Geograph – Oliver Dixon

their bodies were moved to the gibbet for public display.

Continue on the Wayfarer's Walk to a footpath, left off the main track (Test Way). Follow this path into the field and look out for a footpath sign at which to turn left. With your back to the sign, walk down over the field to the sign on the far side.

3. The Test Way follows much of the course of the River Test from Inkpen Hill to Southampton Water, at this point offering beautiful views across the rolling Hampshire Downs.



© Geograph – Edmund Shaw

Pass through a gateway and into an open field.

4. Excellent views up to Walbury Hill allow full appreciation of its impressive shape. It is easy to imagine from here how imposing the exposed chalk ramparts of the fort would have looked glaring out over the surrounding land.

Follow the left side of the field down-hill to a farm track. Turn right, keeping straight ahead past the farm buildings, until you join the lane. Turn right to reach the village of Combe.

5. Wright's Farmhouse is Grade 2 listed and dates from C14 with C19 fronting.



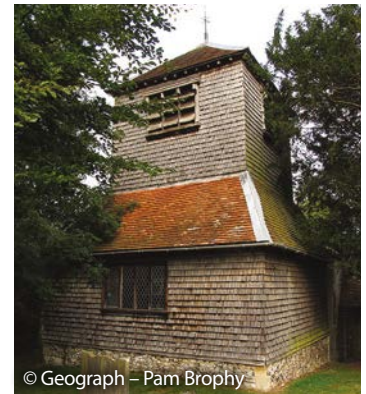
6. Historically part of Hampshire, Combe was transferred to Berkshire in 1895. Situated, as its name suggests in a hollow or valley, its collection of cottages and farms forms one of the most hidden and inaccessible villages in West Berkshire.



© Geograph – Oswald Bertram

To reach Combe Church, follow the lane as it bears to the right at the junction.

7. There has been a church dedicated to St. Swithun on this site since Saxon times. Built of local flint, it dates from the 13th century and is Grade 1 listed. The porch was added in 1652.



© Geograph – Pam Brophy

The font base is 14th century with a Saxon bowl. There are three bells, the oldest of which is pre-reformation c. 1430.

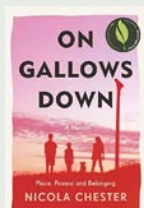
Return to the junction and turn right, following the signs to Lower Farm. Pass the farm, keeping to the track as it rises steadily towards Walbury Hill. Take the bridleway signposted uphill to the left on a sharp right-hand bend and make for the brow of the hill and the car park.

Margery Slatter

On Gallows Down: Place, Protest and Belonging (Chelsea Green Publishing Co) is a prize-winning memoir by local author Nicola Chester who lives nearby. Shortlisted for the Wainright Prize, it has received many accolades.

"A powerful personal and political journey through place that charts the profound influence we have on nature, and that nature has on us."

– Rob Cowen, author of *Common Ground* and *The Heeding*



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