



West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 108
SUMMER
2024



Riparian Meadow © Sophie Cunningham

Farming Wet Pastures

British wetland meadows and pastures have declined by over 97% in the last half century. Today, less than 3,000 ha of meadows remain. Many species that are supported by these habitats are also in severe decline. Just over the border in South Oxfordshire, the Yellow Wagtail project is working to reverse this trend.

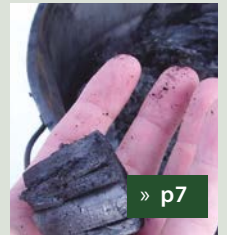
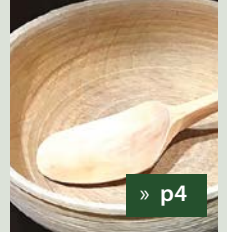
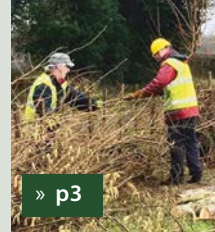
One could hardly feel alone paddling up the Thames on a sunny summer's day in 1952. The continuous hum of insects, birdsong, perhaps the laughter of people swimming. Floating closer to Clifton Hampden Bridge, one would hear the chatter of house martins bouncing off the bridge arch. Floating under the bridge, house martins would be darting in all directions as they returned from the riparian grassland

with mouthfuls of food. Over 500 nests covered the brick work, many tiny beaks poking out as chicks impatiently waited for their next meal.

Paddling up the Thames on a sunny summer's day today feels very different; the occasional hum of an insect or song of a bird; under Clifton Hampden Bridge, the only noise is the drone of the cars driving overhead; all that can be seen is brickwork.

In 2020, the house martin joined 69 other bird species on the Red List of UK Birds of Conservation Concern. Reasons for house martin declines are still unclear but likely due to changes in foraging conditions and declines in the insects that they feed on. Insect declines are thought to be having devastating consequences for many other bird species such as the swift and yellow wagtail.

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Plus lots more...

The story above sparked the initiation of the Yellow Wagtail Partnership, a landscape scale conservation initiative. The project aims to restore four miles of riparian pastures along the River Thames from Clifton Hampden to Shillingford, to reverse the declines in invertebrates, birds, and high-quality grassland.

Yellow wagtails would have also been a familiar sight in 1952, when they foraged and nested in the grasslands. This Red List species has declined by 97% in wetland habitats since 1970. The charismatic bird still breeds in small numbers in the area and has the potential to respond strongly to new land management practices, if we can get them right. For this reason, the yellow wagtail became the Partnership's flagship species.

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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
July 2024		
Tue 2nd July 10:00	Lockdown Woods, Hungerford	Maintaining young trees and improving public access. Off-road parking at the end of Marsh Lane, off Smitham Bridge Road. SU32 7684 districts.unusable.genetics
Tue 9th July 10:00	Sulham Home Farm	Continuing ragwort control on this SSSI. Parking at Sulham Home Farm. Please bring a fork if you can. SU643 758 artist.resist.humans
Tue 16th July 10:00	Ashampstead Common	Raking previously cut grass in woodland glades. Meet at Buckhold car park. SU587 751 swells.wrist.dandelions
Tue 23rd July 10:00	Grovepit Common, Leckhampstead	Path maintenance on this parish wildlife site. Access the common 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
Tues 30th July 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm	Habitat management. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield. SU584 723 telephone.brink.crate
August 2024		
Tue 6th Aug 10:00	Furze Hill, Hermitage	Grassland 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 13th Aug 10:00	Eling Way	Clearing invasive vegetation either side of the Eling Way. Park at Furze Hill/ Hermitage village hall car park. SU512 740 simmer.equipping.casual
Tue 20th Aug 10:00	Hosehill Lake, Sheffield Bottom	Construction tasks and footpath clearance around the lake, with BBOWT. Park in the car park of the Fox and Hounds pub at Sheffield Bottom. SU650 699 noisy.doll.roof
Tue 27th Aug 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm	1/2-day task followed by volunteers' BBQ. Meet at the Black Barn off Back Lane between Stanford Dingley and Bradfield. Please bring a drink plus plate and cutlery. SU584 723 telephone.brink.crate
September 2024		
Tue 3rd Sept 10:00	Winterbourne Wood	Coppicing hazel and clearing paths and bracken. Park on the main woodland entrance track. SU447 717 headboard.tubes.olive
Tue 10th Sept 10:00	Malt House	Coppicing and hedge laying, Parking is on the track off the West Woodhay road. SU404 637 belts.glorified.connects
Tue 17th Sept 10:00	Padworth Common	Habitat and pathway management, with BBOWT. Parking at the reserve. SU619 648 bigger.restores.highlighted
Tue 24th Sept 10:00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland and woodland management. Meet at the Crossroads. SU556 691 taskbar.flagpole.sensual

Volunteers: Task Roundup

With Southern England recording 239% of average rainfall for February, the wettest on record, and 150% of the long-term average for March and April, it is not surprising that we had another cancelled task day in this quarter due to water-logged conditions – this time at Rushall Manor Farm. However, volunteers have continued to carry out valuable habitat maintenance work, and to practise their construction skills on projects which enable access to the countryside.

Hedging has featured prominently in this quarter, with dead hedging more frequently used than in the recent past. This has proved to be an excellent way of containing the arisings from woodland and tree work (without burning), making a useful barrier where needed or providing a valuable linear wildlife habitat, especially good for small mammals, insects and birds.



Hedge Planting, Furze Hill © Andy Hollox

In February, we planted some new hedging at **Furze Hill** and coppiced hazel stools in the woods to open up a new glade. The small pieces of 'waste' wood were used to create a dead hedge acting as a physical barrier to encourage walkers to stay on the



Dead Hedging, Carbin's Wood © Andy Hollox

footpath. A similar technique was used at **Carbin's Wood**, near Chapel Row, using large amounts of brush generated by a tree felling contract, whereas at **Winterbourne** we finished creating a long boundary dead hedge using the smaller arisings from fallen trees. Several jobs on the BBOWT site at **Padworth Common** included extending a dead hedge between the main path and an area used by ground nesting birds; repairing paths; and mending potholes in the car park. We continued laying the **Malt House** hedge started last year, our second visit this year. Another 50 yards was completed – a great effort by everybody involved. We return at the start of the next hedge laying season.

By the end of February, ground conditions had improved sufficiently on **Bucklebury Common** to allow teams to remove more invasive birch from the heath and for felling substantial scrub growth to create halos around some magnificent trees. Our annual visit to the open space at **Hillgreen** concentrated on clearing bramble encroaching along the edges and footpaths, and where it threatened to overcome newly planted trees. Areas were also cleared to allow access to fell some dead elm trees, making the area safer for public use. At **Winterbourne** we extended the management of the Primrose Ridge by "blitzing" another area of tor grass which is threatening to swamp the primroses and bluebells, and coppiced some very large hazel stools.



Haloing Trees, Bucklebury Common © Andy Hollox



Footpath Construction, Cold Ash © Andy Hollox

Moving into the bird nesting season meant a change of focus away from managing vegetation into the less invasive activities associated with footpath maintenance. Three teams were at work at the **Cold Ash WAG** winching out laurel roots, clearing around young trees and extending the surfaced footpath through the site. This greatly improves public access and helps to prevent erosion on the grass slopes. A similar task was continued from previous visits to **Hosehill Lake**, where the surfaced path allows a much easier and well-defined walk around the BBOWT reserve. Another 30m of newly-constructed path was completed. Our task at **The Mire**, on Inkpen Common, was more preventative. We completed the job started last year of constructing a simple post and one-rail fence to keep horses from straying onto this BBOWT reserve from the bridleway which runs along its edge.

In **Redhill Wood**, we cleared footpaths which were obstructed by fallen logs and cut down some potentially dangerous leaning trees, making habitat piles with the large pieces of wood. Large amounts of standing dead wood, of huge value to wildlife, were retained. The weather was sunny and very pleasant for working, although some of the ground was still wet following recent rainfall.

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

The Woodland Skill of Bodging

Bodging (or chair-bodgering) is a woodturning craft traditionally carried out close to where a tree was felled. The exact derivation of the term 'bodging', with its inappropriate negative connotation, is debateable but it can be used to describe 'green wood-working activities'. Green wood is wood fresh from the tree, with a high moisture content, that is softer to work than seasoned wood.

The 'Berkshire Bodgers' are a Hungerford based group who meet on a monthly basis and create objects such as spoons, bowls, stools, tools and chairs from green wood. In truth there is as much energy expended on socialising as craft, but the core activity is working wood from the tree to become an item of beauty or function (or both), usually using hand tools and traditional techniques associated with rural crafts. That's not to say we eschew modernity where appropriate, but we're more closely aligned with hand saws, carving axes, carving knives and pole lathes while working in the woods than we are with electric tools, right angles and modern workshop techniques. The modern electric battery powered drill is probably the most frequent exception to that statement but many of us still use a brace and bit.

'Berkshire Bodgers' is one of approximately 35 local groups of the UK-based Association of Pole Lathe Turners and Green Woodworkers (APTGW). We

meet on the 3rd Sunday of each month under a shelter in a copse at Little Hidden Farm, near Hungerford. There are usually around a dozen of us but sometimes as many as 20 – fewer at a freezing winter meeting! We have a campfire going from which a kettle readily provides tea and coffee and the occasional bacon buttie is conjured (other options encouraged).

The group includes carvers of varying ability levels from a couple that rank among the best in the country to novices. Some teach, some make a living from making, but most of us are just hobby enthusiasts. Around half of us are retirees but we have a few younger members to encourage and instil youthful enthusiasm.

Newcomers are welcomed whether they come with thoughts on what they'd like to make and their own tools, or to borrow some tools and have a dabble, or even just to look and chat with a cuppa. There is usually someone carving a spoon and currently we have a small group pulling together parts to make a chair, under the guidance of one of the more experienced bodgers. One of our regulars is keen on cultivating his pole lathe skills, so there is often a pole lathe in action. Typically, these are the sort of activities you find on a paid course but here they are available to sample locally in a taster session or on a regular basis, with or without guidance.

Those interested in participating need a degree of practical capability. Activities involve lifting and sawing logs, wielding a carving axe to shape wood on a chopping block and then refining the shape using a draw knife on a shave horse or with a carving knife. Using traditional hand tools and skills means that the pace of activity is slow, which can be therapeutic and meditative – most find it a pleasant escape from the stresses of the fast-paced modern world.



Sean on the Pole Lathe

© Trevor Howard

For those that come regularly we ask that they join the APTGW, which provides insurance cover, and give a donation of £2.50 when they attend to fund tea, coffee and occasional extras. Anyone is welcome to drop by and visit for free.

If you're interested in coming along or finding out more, please contact teeyaitch@gmail.com or on 07501 886441.

Trevor Howard



Bill's Bench

© Trevor Howard



Stick Back Chair

© Trevor Howard



Bowl and Spoon

© Trevor Howard



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



Continued from page 1.

We are working to change the land management of the riparian pastures in a way that benefits wildlife, can be enjoyed by local communities, produces healthy livestock, and is financially sustainable for our farming partners. This includes increasing the plant diversity in the grasslands to benefit species both above and below the ground, and sympathetic grazing regimes to promote rare plant species and seed dispersal.

The Partnership aims to use an evidence-based approach to land



management. We are working with universities and research institutes, supporting a PhD project at the University of Reading, and collaborating with the Wellcome Sanger Institute BIOSCAN project, which aims to study the genetic diversity of one million flying insects across the UK. All this is helping us to understand the local insect diversity which will allow us to see how changes in land management are influencing insect populations. This will inform our land management plans.

Our project area is just a tiny proportion of the farmed landscape that covers 70% of England, so can this project really make a difference? We are actively engaging with farmers and land managers to inspire them to change their land management practices, as well as engaging with communities to show them how



they can support farmers who are doing their bit for nature. By working together, we may just be able to create a more natural, resilient and biodiverse countryside for the benefit of all.

The Yellow Wagtail Partnership is hosted by Wild Oxfordshire who is proud to be working with Earth Trust, Lower Farm Partnership and Church Farm Partnership to deliver this project. To learn more, please visit our website: www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk or contact sophie@wildoxfordshire.org.uk

Sophie Cunnington, Project Officer

Have you heard a Cuckoo?

The UK has lost more than a third of its cuckoos in the past 25 years, but the full reasons why are still unclear. Following these birds on migration helps British Trust for Ornithology researchers understand the pressures they face. After heading out across the English Channel and south through Europe, the cuckoos have a Mediterranean Sea



crossing to contend with before they face the Sahara. Most traverse the desert in a single non-stop flight, travelling at altitudes of up to 5 km to avoid the worst of the heat.

Unlike other birds that breed in Europe but spend the winter in sub-Saharan Africa, cuckoos' clocks can't adjust to climate change – they have not brought forward their arrival in the UK in response to global warming. Cuckoos migrating to the UK leave their wintering grounds in the rainforests of central Africa in late February and spend a month or so fattening up in west Africa ahead of their arduous non-stop Sahara crossing. Data from 87 cuckoos tagged since 2011 show that the birds must wait here for the explosion in invertebrate numbers brought by the arrival of the spring rains. Although the timing of that annual event remains unchanged, spring is arriving earlier in Europe, leading to a potential mismatch between the cuckoos' arrival,



the peak availability of the caterpillars they rely on for food and the breeding cycles of the host species they parasitise.

Species that are unable to shift the timing of their arrival on their breeding grounds are known to be declining more quickly than those that can. The results of a new study suggest that cuckoos are exposed to a greater risk of death as they face a race against time to arrive back on their breeding grounds in time. Providing better quality habitat at strategic locations along cuckoo migration routes might help the birds complete their epic journeys in a more timely and less energy-costly way, helping them adapt to our changing climate.

Margery Slatter

Thatching the Black Barn

John Simonds died forty years ago. He was a nineteen-year-old, full of life and hopes for the future. In response to his death, a small group of locals set up the John Simonds Trust to bring children into the countryside, based at the derelict Rushall Manor site. Renovation started with international work camps involving 40 young people from across Europe and the Soviet Bloc each summer for 10 years. They pitched into the dilapidated buildings, the pond and surrounding woodland.

In 1998 major renovation was carried out on the barn. The tin roof was removed, the plate supporting the barn replaced and the lean-to rebuilt, with a new floor replacing the chalk that had characterised this eighteenth century tithe barn. At that time the government contributed 50% of the costs under a Stewardship Agreement. Sir William Benyon opened the refurbished barn, with its resplendent thatch. Jason Morley, the thatcher, and carpenter, Bob Beavis, were there to take the credit.

It is amazing how quickly 25 years goes by! So, in late 2023, Jason returned with one of his original team to put a coat over the thatch. This time we were able to watch Jason, Richard, Dan and Jason's son, Scot (now 25 and following in his father's footsteps) at work on the roof.

The art of thatching has been passed down from generation to generation, using the same tools and materials, going back centuries. Today a hand-held hedge cutter comes in handy, replacing hand shears when cleaning off the eaves. The straw used for a thatched roof is triticale, a cross between rye and wheat, noted for its length and



South view of finished roof © Jenny Obin

strong stem, and grown organically. The triticale is harvested with a combine using a stripper header. Three of the team thatched the front of the barn, using long ladders. Scot was round the back. The weather was bad and yet they carried on, despite the exposed surface of the roof, determined to finish by Christmas. They carried up bundles of straw in one arm to gradually put a new coat over the old thatch, bit by bit, day after day. Each bundle is held on with a spar, a length of straight hazel split and pointed at both ends and then twisted in the middle to hold the straw, rather like a hair grip. Along the ridge a thick straw rope is made and then covered with wetted straw so that it does not break and folded over with many layers. Next, it is held in place by substantial lengths of split hazel fixed with spars. To finish the roof the coat is dressed to



South view during works © Jenny Obin

make sure it is even, and swept hard with a stiff broom. Then the vital part: the roof is covered with wire to stop birds and rats finding it a warm, secure place to make a home. (Most of the grain has been removed from the straw, but anything left is quite tasty!)

What an opportunity it has been to watch craftsmen producing a thatch which will keep the rain out for around a quarter of a century! And it really does look stunning. The whole project cost £125k this time, with a 20% grant from the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, while the remaining cost was shared between the Trust and the owner, William Cumber. We are so grateful to the many who contributed to making this happen, including the generous donation from the WBCS. The Black Barn at Rushall Manor, in the beautiful Pang Valley, is now safe for the use and enjoyment of the many children and adults who come here every year.

John Bishop



North view during works © Jenny Obin



North view of finished roof © Jenny Obin

BIOCHAR: a sustainable, natural soil ameliorant (Part 1)

If I said that I could make a soil-improving product from organic waste materials that sequesters carbon into the soil which would have been released into the atmosphere; that can also hold air, water and nutrients to alleviate the effects of drought and floods; and provides a source of soil microbes and sufficient nutrients from a one-off application *forever*, would you believe me?

Probably not! But with Biochar, a type of charcoal, it is possible. Biochar acts as habitat for the all-important microbiology of the soil, and it stores, within its sponge-like structure, air, water and nutrients. So, it is good for both retaining water during dry periods and providing air pockets in soil that would otherwise be waterlogged. Absorbed nutrients are distributed to plant roots by bacteria and mycorrhizal fungi. These properties mean that one application can ameliorate soils and supply nutrients to crops or gardens, *forever*, in an environmentally beneficial way; you would never again need to apply inorganic fertilizers. Too good to be true? Even if only some of these claims are achievable, the beauty of it is that you can make it at home.

If you have a conventional bonfire, all that is left at the end is a pile of ash. The carbon that was once wood has gone up

in smoke into the atmosphere. However, if you are planning on burning branches, waste timber from offcuts, old pallets, straw, bones, eggshells or weeds, you can burn it all in a smoke free, carbon neutral way and end up with a very good quality charcoal. For every 1kg of charcoal that you make, it saves 2kg of carbon going into the atmosphere. The properties of this charcoal come from the microscopic cavities - an ounce of charcoal has the surface area of three football fields - providing ample surface area for the retention of microbes, nutrients, air and water. When dry, the Biochar charcoal sounds hollow and metallic; a bit like glass when dropped. It is light and, being composed of in excess of 75% (or better still 90%) pure carbon, you can safely bite it to test it as there should be no taste.

It can be made on an open fire, igniting the kindling from the top to draw oxygen up and away from the branches below. However, the ability to burn off the environmentally harmful gasses is reduced, and surplus heat is lost to the air, rather than being used to cook the charcoal. Various shaped dug out pits and barrels (you can even use a barbecue) improve this method, but best of all is to make, or buy, a retort (a container inside another container where the gasses that are emitted get



Homemade Biochar

© CC BY-SA 4.0



A cut open barrel is easy to use

© Charles Gilchrist

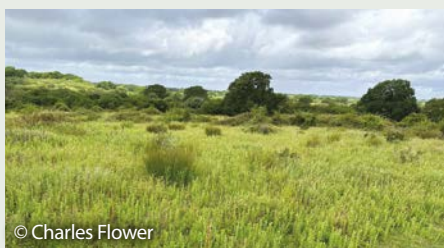
burnt off, providing fuel for the fire in the process). The important thing for any method is to heat the wood to a very high temperature in the absence of oxygen (a process called pyrolysis). This cooks the charcoal rather than smouldering it - the difference between how the old woodland charcoal burners produced their charcoal and the aims of Biochar production. To further reduce the environmental impact, you can use the top of the retort to cook on.

In Part 2 of this article in the Autumn edition of Upstream, I will explain how to make the charcoal for Biochar, its many uses, and how to inoculate it with nutrients and activate it with microbes, before it can be used to ameliorate your soil.

Charles Gilchrist

Re 'Rewilding'...

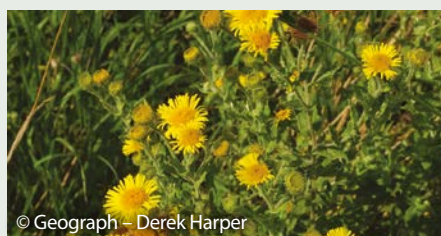
...here is a field of fleabane gone mad in a rewilding experiment. Nothing will eat it! What can you do with it?



© Charles Flower

As the Irishman said, 'I would not start from here!'

Charles Flower

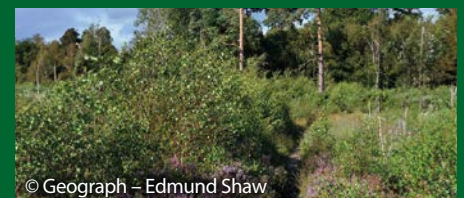


© Geograph - Derek Harper

In case you're wondering...

...there's an old Irish joke about a man from Dublin who comes out to the country for his cousin's wedding. He stops to ask a farmer for directions. The farmer thinks for a moment, frowns and says: 'You know, if I were you, I wouldn't start from here.'

Date for your Diary



© Geograph - Edmund Shaw

Wed 3rd July 9:15pm
Nightjars - a short walk on Bucklebury Common

Join Society members to look for and hear these summer visitors to the heathland. Meet at the Crossroads on the Common.

SU556 961 taskbar.flagpole.sensual

Normans and Navigators at Hamstead Marshall

An easy walk of 6.5km (4 miles). Two stretches of roadside walking. Park by Enborne Church SU435657. OS Map 158 might be useful. Refreshments at The Red House, Marsh Benham and surrounding villages.



© Geograph – Pam Brophy

1. Enborne Church, with its Saxon/Norman origins, contains a 12th century font, a wall painting dating from 1316, and the Michael Bell of 1260, possibly the oldest church bell in England. Beautiful views across to Beacon Hill can be seen from the churchyard, in which many casualties from the 17th century Battle of Newbury are buried.

Cross the green diagonally to the right, turning right alongside the road for 500m, until you reach a footpath leaving to the left along a driveway.

2. The current woodland boundary of **Enborne Copse** is almost identical to that shown on Rocque's map of Berkshire in 1761, but most of it is now a conifer plantation and only the area designated as an SSSI retains its semi-natural broad leaved woodland.

On reaching the canal, cross over and turn left by the pillbox to follow the towpath past Benham Lock.

3. The **WW2 pillbox** is one of many constructed along the east-west waterways of the Kennet and Pang valleys to act as a second line of defence against a possible Nazi invasion.

4. Completed in 1810, the **Kennet and Avon Canal** took 16 years to construct. It runs 87 miles from Bristol to Reading and thence via the Thames to London. It was redundant by 1940 but reopened in 1990 after enormous local effort to restore the route.

Cross the weir by the footbridge at Benham Broad and continue to the road at Hamstead Lock, turning left to pass Hamstead Mill and the Craven Fisheries. Turn left into Hamstead Park and take the track to the right.



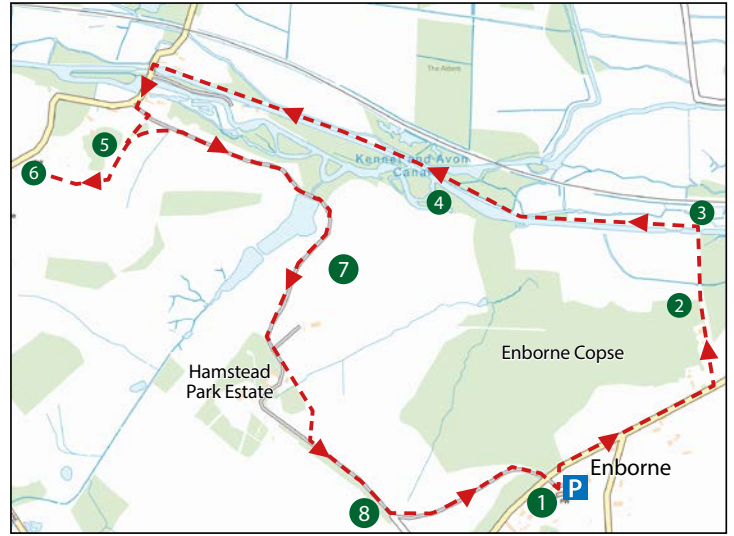
© Geograph – Michael Hand

5. Within Hamstead Park stand three, much eroded, **castle mottes**. Two of them are on the right as you approach the church. The suffix in the name 'Hamstead Marshall' recalls the celebrated Marshal family who held the manor in Norman times. These two mottes are almost certainly all that is left of their home.

Before reaching two isolated and enigmatic 16th century gateposts belonging to the



© Geograph – Stephen Richards



demolished, fire-ruined Hamstead mansion, detour to the church via a gate in the wall.

6. **Hamstead Church** is of Norman origin with later re-modelling. The brick tower was built in the 1620's. The pulpit, font, communion rail and box pews also date from this period. The churchyard contains an ancient yew and the mausoleum of the Craven family, owners of Hamstead Park.

Retrace your steps past the mottes to rejoin the main driveway, turning right through the park.

7. **The Park**, containing many fine trees, was enclosed by a pale, the remains of which can be seen in several places in the form of a ditch and bank. It was designed to keep deer in. Edward III stayed at Hamstead several times in the 1350's, on hunting expeditions, as the park had been stocked with deer a hundred years earlier. Standing near the old fishponds, which were stocked with royal bream as early as

1230, is a third unfinished motte possibly erected as a siege castle by King Stephen during the war with his cousin Matilda in the 1150's.

As the drive approaches the buildings of the present Hamstead Park and sweeps to the right, take the footpath straight on until an avenue of trees is reached.

8. Ahead, in the trees, is the **Memorial Stone** dedicated to the US forces 101st Airborne Regiment who were encamped here in the closing months of WW2.



© Geograph – Oscar Taylor

Turn left and follow the driveway as it curves to the road, emerging opposite the car park at Enborne Church and green.

Margery Slatter

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