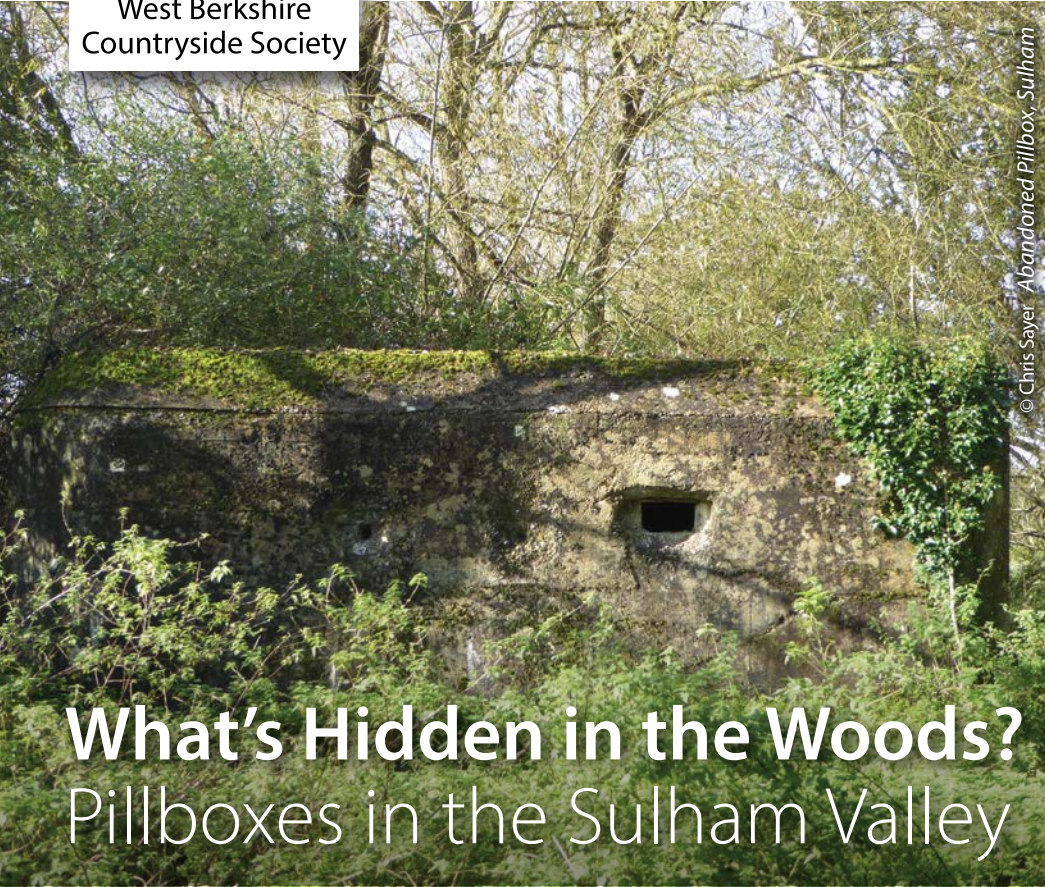




West Berkshire
Countryside Society

UPSTREAM

ISSUE 110
WINTER
2025



© Chris Sayer Abandoned Pillbox, Sulham

What's Hidden in the Woods? Pillboxes in the Sulham Valley

Throughout the year the Society's volunteers can be seen working at various locations in the Sulham valley between Nunhide Farm, in Sulham, and Pangbourne. Whether we are hedging, clearing the banks of the river or pulling ragwort, we always seem to be close to a Second World War pillbox. Have you ever wondered why they are there?

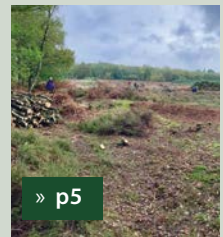
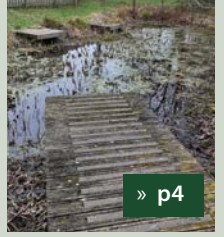
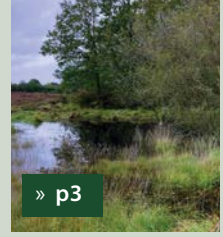
To answer this question, you need to go back to 1940. In May of that year, the Germans swept through the Low Countries and France culminating in the evacuations at the Channel ports and, eventually, the Franco-German Armistice in June. The British Empire found itself fighting Germany and Italy almost alone. Furthermore, our armed forces were depleted, both in terms of troops and weaponry, and there was

the real fear of invasion. Step forward General Sir Edmund Ironside, who was appointed to lead the Home Defence Executive with the task of organising the defence of the British Isles.

One immediate action was a nationwide programme of building defences, a key element of which was the GHQ Line. This was a series of lines of pillboxes stretching across southern England. Generally following existing features, such as the Kennet and Avon Canal and the river Thames, they were designed to protect London and the industrial heartland of the country. Their function was to slow the advance of the Germans and so give time to move Britain's limited armoured and mobile forces to face the key threats.

The line of pillboxes in the Sulham valley, part of GHQ Line Red, was anchored on the resistance hubs of Reading and Pangbourne. It was

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designed to protect the flank of London and stop the Germans from swinging round to take London's defences from the rear if they broke through the GHQ Line Blue along the Kennet and Avon Canal.

Pillboxes were built by local contractors using a series of standard designs. In the case of the Sulham valley, several subcontractors worked under the direction of Smallbone's of Streatley. What you see today are a mixture of infantry and the more unusual anti-tank gun pillboxes. What you don't see are the supporting earth defences (anti-tank ditch, gun pits, trenches etc.) that would have connected, with interlocking fire, what appear now to be isolated positions. These supporting positions were filled in during the latter part of the war, as there was a move to bring land back into cultivation and pasture.

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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
January 2025		
Tue 7th Jan 10:00	Holt Lodge Farm	Coppicing. Meet at Holt Lodge Farmhouse near Kintbury. SU387 648 skid.comments.tripling
Tue 14th Jan 10:00	Decoy Heath	Clearing invasive willow and birch. SU613 634 spindles.pity.rear
Tue 21st Jan 10:00	Bucklebury Meadows	Working on hedges around the meadows behind the pub/restaurant in upper Bucklebury. Park in Morton's Lane. SU543 686 chuckling.notion.regaining
Tue 28th Jan 10:00	Sulham Farm	Woodland management. Park along the track adjacent to Sulham Church. SU645742 across.influencing.spots
February 2025		
Tue 4th Feb 10:00	Paice's Wood	Creating scallops to let in more light. Parking is in the top car park. SU586 636 treaties.barman.unfocused
Tue 11th Feb 10:00	Malt House, West Woodhay	Hedge laying and coppicing. Parking is at the entrance to the field off the W. Woodhay Rd or as directed on the day. SU4079763945 belts.glorified.connects
Tue 18th Feb 10:00	Sheepdrove, Lambourne	Continue hedge laying and tidying 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 25th Feb 10:00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Clearing trees and shrubs to create new haloes around important trees. Meet at the Crossroads. SU556 691 taskbar.flagpole.sensual
March 2025		
Tue 4th Mar 10:00	Winterbourne Wood	Clearing fallen trees, dead hedging and general clearing of wind fallen brush. Park on the main woodland entrance track. SU447 717 headboard.tubes.olive
Tue 11th Mar 10:00	Rushall Manor Farm	Ride widening. Likely to be very muddy so please bring wellies. Parking by the Black Barn. SU584 723 telephone.brink.crate
Tue 18th Mar 10:00	Malt House, West Woodhay	Continuing hedge laying. Parking is on the entrance to the field off the W. Woodhay Rd or as directed on the day. SU4079763945 belts.glorified.connects
Tue 25th Mar 10:00	Bucklebury Common	Heathland management. Clearing trees and shrubs. Meet at the Crossroads. SU556 691 taskbar.flagpole.sensual

Volunteers: Task Roundup

© Andy Hollox
Newly Cleared Pond, Bucklebury Common

Many of our activities in this quarter could be described by such terms as 'opening up' and 'letting in light', which may seem to be quite destructive but are often vitally important to habitat diversification and regeneration.

Our **Winterbourne** task was all about opening space. By removing willow and alder, a glade was created under five large oaks letting the light in to benefit the ground flora. On the bank, scalloped areas of bracken were removed to reduce the dominance of this aggressive plant and to provide openings for tree planting. The willow brush and cut bracken was used to create habitat piles.

Two visits were made to **Rushall Manor Farm**, the first to clear around the pond and carry out woodland maintenance, followed by our annual BBQ. Our second visit involved processing timber and brush from large diseased ash trees; and laying some of a roadside hedge full of dead elm, made all the trickier by overhead cables and persistent rain.



Volunteer Work Party © Andy Hollox

On **Bucklebury Common** we continue to increase and diversify the rare heathland habitat. A glade of wood pasture under oak standards was created to encourage the heathland to re-establish amongst acid grassland, with the arisings 'dead-hedged' along the paths and edges. We were glad to welcome volunteers from Passiv UK for a waterlogged day spent clearing scrubby birch from heath where nightjars, woodlarks and Dartford warbler nest. Part of a pond was also

cleared to let light in and to reduce water loss through the action of trees around the perimeter. Further heathland task days, at **Padworth Common**, were spent clearing invasive scrub and larger trees from an area favoured by adders. This added an extra dimension to the risk assessment! However, none were seen despite some warm September sunshine. A last-minute change took our October visit to the South Common. As usual a lot was achieved, opening up a large area of rare heathland habitat and an overgrown pathway.



Wet Lunch, Malt House © Margery Slatter

Two days were spent at the **Malt House**. The first comprised coppicing and collecting stakes and binders for subsequent hedge laying. The second task was to continue laying the hedge started in 2023. Despite several heavy rain showers, fifteen hardy souls made excellent progress. The visit to **Sheepdrove** to continue laying the rather mature and leggy hedge was equally successful. We laid more metres of hedge than on any of our previous visits. Dry weather helped, as did the use of our electric chainsaws – a great boon in tackling more substantial growth.



Tool Station © Andy Hollox

A different reason for action can be seen on sites where access is of major concern. We continued with the ongoing construction work at **Hosehill Lake**, repairing a section of the existing path to ensure there is no repetition of previous winters when it became too muddy to use. Rumour has it we may be nearing the end of the path!



Path Construction, Hosehill © Andy Hollox

At **Furze Hill**, a mix of activities occupied a range of skills. Bramble was cut from the meadow to prevent it taking over the wildflower sward; dead hedges were built and repaired using brush from felled diseased ash, helping to delineate pedestrian routes; and drainage works carried out beside a boardwalk where the wet weather has made access difficult.

Contrastingly, our work at **Emery Down** was related to maintaining a safe woodland classroom for the primary school. Brambles were cleared alongside a recently planted hedge and to open up paths, whilst rampant holly growth was also reduced. We cleared around some new hazel stools to encourage regeneration of woodland plants. A large hazel was coppiced. Several potentially hazardous dead trees were felled and others removed to let in more light.

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

Helping Nature to Thrive: The Newbury Nature Corridor Project

We are all aware of the importance of nature reserves in helping in the conservation of our native plant and animal species and their habitats. However, ecologists have long called for the establishment of nature corridors – joining isolated areas of habitat so animals can move between different subpopulations and increase the gene pool as well as expanding their area for foraging. This is amply illustrated by BBOWT's work in creating adder tunnels at Greenham Common, featured in the last 'Upstream'.

The Newbury Friends of the Earth group is aiming to establish a nature corridor in a multi-year project, involving schools, scout troops, and churches as well as residents within the town. The project recently won an award at Newbury Show.

The Newbury Nature Corridor Project is an extension of the group's Lockdown Woods environmental work and will link two of the Lockdown Woods in Newbury. We have planted over 2,000 native broadleaf trees in five commemorative community woodlands in West Berkshire since winter 2020, dedicated to the memory of people lost in the COVID pandemic. The group actively manages these areas with volunteers. One of the West Berks Countryside Society volunteers, Terry Davis, generously gave us considerable advice and hands-on help with the tree planting, and others recently visited to advise on site management, so we are indebted to the group!



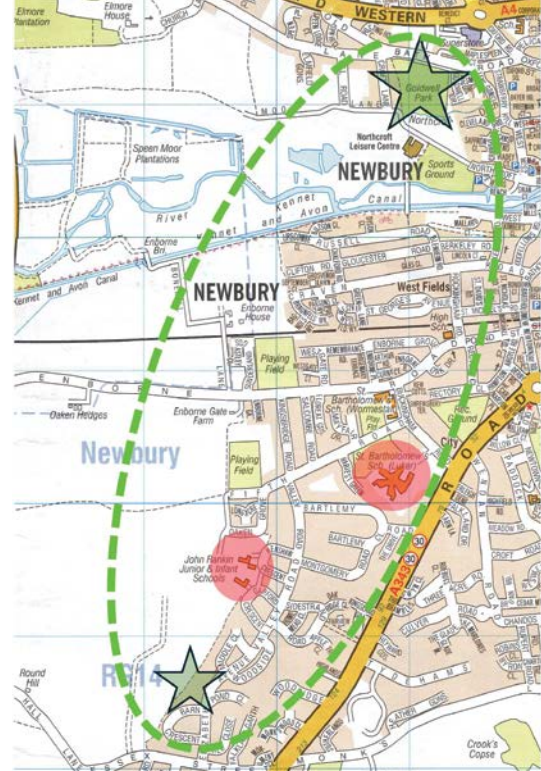
St Bart's Pond before Renovation © Susan Millington

The Lockdown Woods in Goldwell Park and Barn Crescent, 2.5 miles apart by foot, will be connected through the Nature Corridor initiative. The route between them includes significant landmarks such as the Kennet and Avon canal, the mainline railway, two local schools, as well as residential streets with gardens and wide verges. It includes nine nature-rich areas managed by Newbury Town Council, including three allotment sites.

The Project has been running for just over a year, with the support and help of the District and Town Councils, and funding from many sources. As part of the project, both schools are restoring ponds and nature areas in their grounds; we have plans for new wildlife-friendly plantings in open spaces; and have started bulb planting on verges, with permission from Newbury Town Council and West Berkshire Council. In the next two winters we will plant 250m of hedgerow and over 100 saplings throughout the area, as well as four wildflower strips on residential streets.

Recently, our group helped at a Big Gardening Morning at John Rankin Infant and Primary Schools, planting native spring-flowering bulbs with the children, and working on one of their newly-restored wildlife ponds. Next spring we will help to prepare and sow a large area of wildflower meadow in the grounds and put up several bat boxes. At St Bartholomew's secondary school, we are advising and assisting with their nature garden restoration and encouraging pupils to establish new habitats for wildlife in their own gardens.

Two local scout troops are planning, with our help, to conduct a door-to-door survey of what residents are already doing to help nature, and what they would like to do in future. The aim is to give local people bird boxes, wildflower seed and hedgehog arches for their fences, as well as providing them with advice on constructing wildlife ponds and other nature-enhancing



Newbury Nature Corridor Area

© NFOE



Big Gardening Morning, John Rankin Schools
© Susan Millington

features. Our concept is to develop a wide, nature-rich area through which frogs can hop from pond to pond, and hedgehogs can snuffle around in search of food and a mate.

In future years, we will reach out to local churches and other groups to widen community involvement in this work. And the concept is spreading – there are already two other nature corridors being planned for the local area!

In this all too busy, nature-depleted world, the Newbury Nature Corridor project aims to make it easy for people in our town to help wildlife so that we can all thrive!

Susan Millington
Newbury Friends of the Earth



Lockdown Wood, Goldwell Park © Susan Millington

Continued from page 1.

When looking at many of the pillboxes they seem to be poorly sited with obstructions from hedgerows, trees and buildings. You need to remember that the landscape that we see today is not that of 80 years ago when the pillboxes were built. Most of the trees in the floodplain are younger than the pillboxes themselves and wouldn't have existed in 1940, but there would have been more hedgerows along the field boundaries which would have protected what are now very exposed approaches.



Type 28 Anti-Tank Pillbox

© Chris Sayer

Fortunately for us all, the line was never tested and over the years most of the defensive features have been removed, but that is not the same for the pillboxes themselves. They have proved remarkably resistant to removal – after all they were designed as resilient structures with internal reinforcement. Most farmers and developers have left them alone rather than go to the expense of removing them.

So the next time you wander through the countryside and see something unexpected, ask yourselves the simple question 'Why?' Then look around and

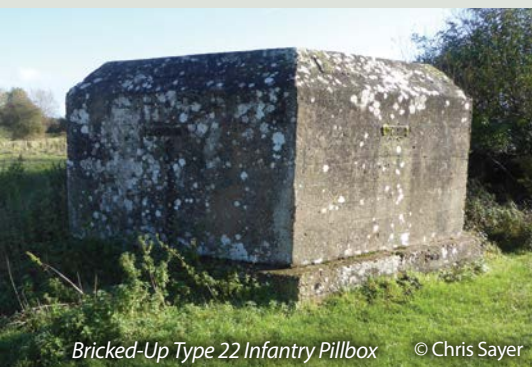


Dragon's Tooth Anti-Tank Obstacle

© Chris Sayer

try and interpret the landscape. You'll be amazed what you can work out and discover.

Chris Sayer



Bricked-Up Type 22 Infantry Pillbox

© Chris Sayer

More Hands make Lighter Work at Bucklebury Common

On Tuesday 15th October, a team of volunteers from Passiv UK lent 16 hands to WBCS in their efforts to clear Bucklebury Common from some invasive silver birch. The Common was very waterlogged and the trees on site had saturated moss and lichen covering the limbs, which soaked our gloves. However

we avoided rain, which was quite miraculous!

We felled many trees, removed the branches, cut the timber down to reasonable lengths, piling the branches and timber high. We found these tasks very different from our day jobs, but thoroughly enjoyable. The WBCS



Passiv Volunteers

members were very friendly and accommodating, making us feel welcome and safe doing a potentially dangerous activity. It was quite impactful to see what a difference we collectively made to the area in a few short hours. It really highlights how much people can achieve with the right tools and by working together.

Many thanks to WBCS for having us! We all had a great time and look forward to joining you again in the future.



Bucklebury – Before



Bucklebury – After



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



Barn Owl Group Update

The 2024 barn owl season began with a very wet Spring, and we wondered how this might impact food availability and breeding. Despite the weather, initial indications suggested an early breeding season. This was certainly the case with some boxes, which demonstrated that egg laying began at the end of March, although in many other boxes the owls typically started laying a bit later.

Whilst out checking boxes during one survey session, we found an unfortunate situation. One of the boxes had rotted through and the whole floor of the box had fallen to the ground along with two barn owl chicks. One had sadly already died but the other was alive and looked quite alert. We knew it was unlikely that the parents would continue to feed the youngster on the ground and contacted the Oxfordshire Wildlife Rescue Centre for advice. They confirmed that, as the chick could not be returned safely to the nest box, it was best to take it into their care. The Barn Owl was driven the 25-minute journey to the Centre, and we handed over the youngster, which seemed to be largely un-phased by its adventure. The chick thrived and was later released. Along with some other rescue owls, it gradually adjusted to its new surroundings in a large aviary. Then, after a period, the doors were left open so they could explore further afield. Supplementary feeding was provided for a while.

As Autumn draws to a close, all our surveys have been completed. This year

has shown a similar position to last year with 105 barn owl chicks fledged from our boxes. This number is in line with the long-term average and is fantastic to see. There was successful breeding in 42 of the boxes checked giving an average brood size of between 2 to 3 chicks. (See table below for more details.)



Barn Owl © Phil Barker

Wherever possible, we try to ring barn owl chicks whilst they are still in the nest so we can monitor their movements in the hope we may find them breeding in the future. We had two interesting reports back from previously ringed birds this season. The first one from a barn owl ringed in 2016 which was later found dead in 2024. Although this was a sad recovery, it demonstrated a very long-lived bird at 8 years. (The average age for a Barn Owl in the wild is thought to be around 4 years.) The second had been ringed in July 2023 and was found alive and well

in June 2024, having travelled 9km from its original nest site. These recoveries show the importance of ringing birds to help with our understanding of their distribution and longevity.

In addition to barn owl boxes, we have also checked a further 28 boxes put up for kestrels, little owls and tawny owls. From some of these boxes, and also birds taking advantage of barn owl boxes, we have had 19 kestrel chicks reported and one tawny owl chick, so it looks to have been a good year for kestrels, too.



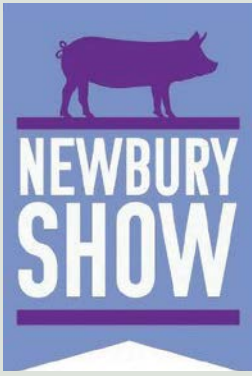
Kestrel © Samantha Boyes

Overall, it has been another good breeding season for barn owls across the area we monitor, and the group is pleased to have played a role in ensuring there are suitable nest boxes available for this beautiful bird.

Samantha Boyes

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
No. barn owl boxes checked	188	187	187	175	185	188	188	196
No. BO chicks estimated to have fledged	114	107	108	54	127	96	103	105
No. boxes with fledged chicks	40	41	41	30	48	36	40	42
% boxes successful	21.3	21.9	21.9	17.1	25.9	19.15	21.28	21.43
Average brood size	2.85	2.61	2.63	1.8	2.65	2.67	2.58	2.5

*Number of barn owl boxes checked amended from last year to remove non-barn owl boxes



Trentham Conservation and Environment Award

The Society's chairman, Nick Freeman, was a judge for this award at this year's Newbury Show. The

award was established 24 years ago to recognise outstanding conservation organisations. Given that Peter Trentham was instrumental in the establishment of our Society, this first invitation to be part of the judging panel was gladly accepted. Several entrants were considered.

The overall winners were ARK (Action for the River Kennet), working



Susan Millington, NFOE © Lucie Robinson

to conserve and enhance the catchments of the Kennet and Pang by environmental management. One of its key projects is the Stonebridge Wild River Reserve, near Marlborough, created by purchasing

land at threat of development. Not only is this water meadow an amazing ecological asset but also an educational resource for youngsters to appreciate when attending 'River Schools'.

The runners up were volunteers for the Newbury Nature Corridor, an initiative of Newbury Friends of the Earth, seeking to establish a network of green spaces on the western side of the town. Susan Millington describes this important local initiative in her article in this issue.

The involvement of WBCS in making this award is much appreciated given its consistency with the Society's aims and objectives.

Letter to the Editor

I read your article on how to encourage hedgehogs with great interest. There was no mention of badgers. Their numbers have increased by approx. 90% in the last 40 years, whereas hedgehog numbers have decreased 75% in the last 25 years. Could there be a connection here? Badgers and hedgehogs compete for the same food and the badger is the only known predator of the hedgehog.

A letter in the Times of Oct 30th by Philip Merricks who runs the Elmley National Nature Reserve in Sheppey, Kent says that they have so many hedgehogs that they have live-trapped more than 1000 in recent years (under licence) and moved them to other sites. The reason for this abundance? A badger proof fence round the reserve.

Charles Flower



European Badgers
© Caroline Legg / Wikimedia Commons

In Memory

Ted Palmer

We are sorry to report the death of another founder member. Ted Palmer died in September after a long illness. He was in his mid-90s. He was among the people who responded to a newspaper article when the Pang Valley Project was set up and he turned out regularly with the Volunteers until his health broke. He leaves a lasting legacy.

Ray Clayton

Our group of volunteers continues to evolve and, obviously, some of the older members are not necessarily remembered by the 'younger' members today, so it was heartening to receive this tribute following the death of Ray Clayton, another long-serving volunteer: "I was very sorry to hear this sad news. When I attended my very first WBCS volunteering day at Paices Wood,

I knew pretty much nothing at all about practical conservation. Ray took me under his wing that day and patiently introduced me to hazel coppicing. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic, Ray enthused me, and I knew by the end of that first day that this was something I wanted to continue and that this group was the one to do it with. For that and for his advice and help many times in the years to come I shall always be grateful."

In the Lambourn Valley – East Garston and Eastbury

An easy 4.5m (7k) walk, ideal for seeing snowdrops in season. Parking and refreshments at East Garston Community Shop SU365766 package.hotspots.float OS Explorer Map 158.

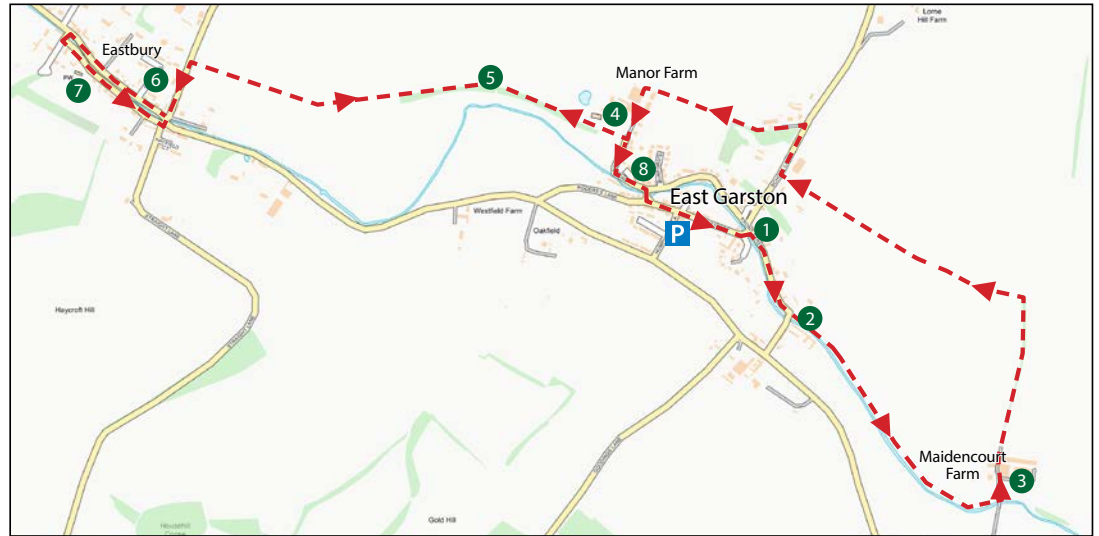


The Lambourn Valley is a great place to see snowdrops. They can be found blooming extensively in the road verges and woodlands and along the banks of the river. Our common wild snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis*, was first brought to this country from Europe in the late 16th century by monks. It became established in the wild during the next 200 years and is an important pollen source for newly emerging bees in early spring.

1. Farming and horse breeding have been important to the area of **East Garston** since the Anglo-Saxon period. Asgar ('the spear of God'), from whom the village derives its name, Asgar's Tun, was severely wounded at the Battle of Hastings defending the English standard. He was procurer of horses for the king and had extensive landholdings here, all of which he lost to the Normans.

From the car park turn right into the village street and follow the road out of the village, keeping straight ahead on the Lambourn Valley Way towards Shefford before the road turns sharply to cross the river.

2. The Lambourn Valley Way runs 22 miles from Uffington hillfort to Newbury following the course of a 1970's Christian Aid charity walk visiting all the



valley churches. The path was officially established in 1992.

At the next junction, turn left to walk through Maiden Court Farm and steadily rise onto the Downs.

3. **Maidencourt Farm** dates from the 19th century, but there are records of a manor on the site in the 12th century. The red and blue bricks were probably made locally. At the top of the hill, look out at the view of the Lambourn Downs and the valley and villages below.

Turn left at the next junction following the path to a lane. Turn right for a short distance and then left by farm buildings onto tracks leading to Manor Farm. Turn left through the farmyard towards the church.

4. **The Church and Manor Farm** are probably built on the site of the medieval manor. The house is Grade II listed. All Saints' Church is a Late Norman (1190AD) cruciform building of flint. Victorian restoration includes stained glass, a wall painting of the Tree of Jesse, and a reredos Nativity painting all by Nathaniel Westlake.

Just beyond the church driveway find and follow the Lambourn Valley Way to the right along the route of a disused railway to the village of Eastbury.

5. **The Lambourn Valley Railway** closed in 1960. It ran from Lambourn to Newbury, connected with the main Devon to London line and was opened in 1898. Some relics of the railway can be spotted along the path.

On reaching a metalled road, turn left and shortly right to walk along the main street of Eastbury village, following the northern bank of the River Lambourn.



6. In **Eastbury** there are many old buildings ranging from small cottages to large medieval barns with thatched roofs, flint walling, red brick and timber

framing. The manor house with its tall chimneys is 17th century. The family of a great Lambourn benefactor, John Estbury, acquired the manor in the 1360's.

After passing the pub, cross over the river to the left and follow the small back lane on the southern bank.

7. **The Church of St. James the Greater** dates from 1851 and has flint walls and a tiled roof. On the opposite side of the river, by the road there is a fine medieval preaching cross.

Reaching the junction, cross over to find the Lambourn Valley Way back to East Garston leaving the lane to the right.

8. In **East Garston** follow the village roads and look at the many fine buildings constructed from local materials including flint and sarson stone. The decorative blue glaze on some of the bricks has been obtained by firing at a high temperature along with glass bottles, bracken and salt.

Margery Slatter

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