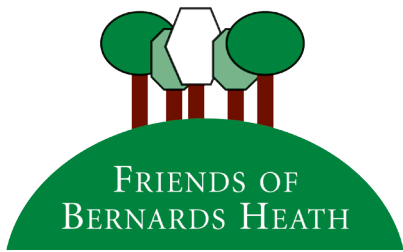


# Bernards Heath

including Beech Bottom Dyke  
and Sandridge Road Wastes

A unique green space  
in St Albans

[www.bernardsheath.org](http://www.bernardsheath.org)



## History of Bernards Heath

**i Saxon**  
The Heath acquired its name having been cleared for agriculture by burning. King Offa of Mercia gifted the Manor of Sandridge - including the Heath - to the Abbey he established to commemorate St Alban in 793. Much of it has been common land ever since.

**i Middle Ages**  
The Second Battle of St Albans was fought across Bernards Heath on Shrove Tuesday 1461 during the Wars of the Roses.

**i Tudor Period**  
Henry dissolved the Abbey in 1539 and the Heath was sold off to the Lord of the Manor of Sandridge.

**i Duke of Marlborough**  
In 1677 John Churchill, later Duke of Marlborough, married the Sandridge heiress, Sarah Jennings and the Heath was part of her dowry. The Duke's heirs are the Spencer family who still own the common land.

**Brick Making**  
Bricks were made on the Heath from around 1440 until the early 1900s. Many of the clay pits are still visible today.

**Gallows**  
Bernards Heath was the place of public execution for St Albans until at least 1752.

**Windmills**  
Bernards Heath is the highest point in St Albans and windmills existed here between 1687 and 1749.

**Cricket**  
Cricket was first played in St Albans on the Heath in 1828 and for a time the upper field was the site of the County Cricket Ground.

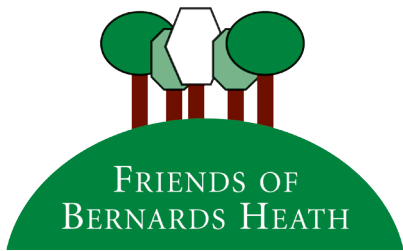
**Farming**  
In the late 19th century much of the Heath was turned over to farming, especially grazing. Heath Farm grew to nearly 700 acres by 1881 and then became a dairy which provided milk for St Albans until around 1930.

**Territorial Army**  
From 1908 until the 1970s the 1st Hertfordshire Battery of the Royal Field Artillery was based here.

**Tallow Works**  
A tallow factory latterly known as Ariston Works existed on this site from about 1890 until the 1960s. The first factory burned down in what is still the biggest ever fire in St Albans.

## History of Sandridge Road Wastes

The strips of land beside Sandridge Road are ancient commons for grazing and resting livestock before market. The right to use the wastes free of charge from the Abbey was secured by the Peasants Revolt (1381). The Second Battle of St Albans (1461) was fought here. They have been managed by the Council since 1915 with their own byelaws. The original alternate red and white cherry trees were planted for George V's Silver Jubilee (some now replaced with flowering crab apples), but the colours commemorate the Houses of York and Lancaster.



## History of Beech Bottom Dyke

This 'formidable dyke' (archaeologist, Sir Mortimer Wheeler's description) is a late Iron Age (50BC-50AD) earthwork, about 1½km long, constructed before the Roman invasion of 43AD. Its purpose is not certain. If defensive, it would have been very effective, but only for its limited length; if a boundary marker, it is 'over the top' - presently up to 35m wide and 10m deep. Instead, the Dyke may well have been a demonstration of status or power, as others in the South-East. Devil's Dyke at Wheathampstead is almost certainly contemporary.

At the Second Battle of St Albans in 1461, Yorkist forces utilised the earthwork in their defences against a Lancastrian attack. In 1864-6 the Midland Railway Line isolated the Dyke's Eastern end and from 1860 to 1895, the bottom accommodated a rifle range for the local volunteers. The cross-bank at Firbank Road was the target butts. The 600 yard firing point was by the Ancient Briton crossroads and the southerly Dyke bank was cut through nearby to permit the line-of-fire.

Beech Bottom was designated a Scheduled Monument (managed by English Heritage and the District Council) in 1981, giving it the highest level of statutory protection - even disturbing the soil is an offence. It is open to the public at all times, although it is hoped to improve the, in places, difficult walking conditions.

## Second Battle of St Albans - Wars of the Roses, 17th February 1461

Most of the fighting in this battle was on Bernards Heath from midday to dusk. Up to 20,000 men fought here and 2,500 died (and were buried on the Heath).

The Lancastrians, under Margaret of Anjou and the Duke of Somerset, invaded the south at the end of January. They pillaged and looted once they crossed the Trent inspiring terror. The Yorkist commander in London was Warwick the Kingmaker. He moved north to meet the Lancastrians on ground of his choosing - Bernards Heath. He had Henry VI prisoner with him there.

The Lancastrians marched across Warwick's front from Royston to Dunstable, and then by a night march to St Michael's, to turn up where and when Warwick was unprepared for them. They outflanked his defences along Beech Bottom and at the King William IV by attacking northwards from St Peter's after being held up in the town during the morning. Warwick then allowed his army to be engaged and defeated piece meal along the axis of the Sandridge Road Wastes.

500 Burgundian mercenaries with hand held firearms (their first use in Britain) made the initial stand on the Heath, but found their weapons useless in the blustery conditions. They were swept aside. Warwick's brother (Baron Montagu) then brought up troops from the Ancient Briton and a fierce fight ensued along a line from St Saviour's to the eastern end of Heath Farm Lane. Montagu was defeated and captured (along with the Speaker of the

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## Second Battle of St Albans - Wars of the Roses, 17th February 1461

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House of Commons). Warwick finally sent his main force south along Sandridge Road, but it was too late and a section of his army turned traitor as well. After more fierce fighting - and at least one counter-attack - the Yorkists broke and Henry VI was recaptured by the Lancastrians while singing hymns under a tree.

In the rout that followed Yorkist fugitives were ridden down and speared in the scrub land, but one notable Lancastrian - Sir John Grey - also lost his life then. His widow married Edward IV - the single most important outcome of the battle although no one knew it at the time. Warwick escaped across Nomansland after dark to fight another day.

The Lancastrians claimed a great victory, but could not follow it up with an attack on London. They retreated to Yorkshire and were annihilated six weeks later at Towton.

## Flora and Fauna

**This important and designated County wildlife site provides shelter for a variety of mammals, birds and insects. It is managed to maintain a balance between the requirements of plant and animal wildlife and the recreational needs of its urban, human neighbours.**

Native English woodland trees - oak, ash, chestnut, lime, hornbeam, yew, holly, hazel and hawthorn - flourish on the Heath along with sycamore and occasional garden escapees. The Friends have a programme of planting to replace dead or diseased trees. Ivy has to be judiciously checked. Common wild flowers such as snowdrops, bluebells, daffodils and cow parsley can be seen early in the year, before the full woodland leaf canopy has developed. Fruits of elder and blackberry are plentiful in autumn, along with woodland fungi and mushrooms which are best picked only by experts!

Scrub, bramble, nettle and leaf litter provide cover for ground-dwelling mammals such as mice, hedgehogs, foxes and muntjac deer while grey squirrels forage on the ground and share the trees with many birds. Blackbirds, mistle and song thrushes can usually be seen and heard, likewise all the titmice family. Other regular nesters include the nuthatch, wren, robin, bull-finch and goldfinch. Green woodpeckers have become more numerous and are thriving along with the greater spotted woodpecker, another resident. You may see, or more likely hear, jays stridently warning of danger, and the occasional sparrowhawk. Following the arrival of the red kite in the Chilterns, individuals impressively patrol the Heath, whilst not actually resident on it. Of our summer visitors, the willow warbler appears to be in decline on the Heath, although the blackcap and other warblers enjoy the open space and trees. To encourage hole-nesting species the Friends have installed nest boxes which have been occupied and home to successful new generations.

## Help preserve this unique green space

Bernards Heath is a unique green space, close to the centre of St Albans, consisting of playing and sports fields and established woodlands which harbour a wide variety of wildlife. It has a fascinating history dating back to the Dark Ages and is the site of one of the major battles of the Wars of the Roses. In Victorian times it was the site of clay pits and brick making from which much of St Albans is built.

In 1915 much of the Heath was made common land and saved for the public for ever. In 2001 following a campaign to prevent development of the Lower Field, which is not common land, Hertfordshire County Council, the owner, and St Albans District Council agreed that the general public would have unrestricted access to the Lower Field in perpetuity. In 2012 the Friends are still fighting to make sure that when the former Ariston site (the old Fire Station, the Pioneer Club etc) is sold for redevelopment the Lower Field will be protected.

Bernards Heath is managed according to a Green Space Action Plan by a partnership which includes the District Council, the County Council, Countryside Management Services and the Friends of Bernards Heath. The majority of routine maintenance is funded by the District Council but certain special projects are funded partly or wholly by the Friends.

The Friends of Bernards Heath believe that the Heath provides an exceptional natural amenity for the locality and the Society exists in order to protect, preserve and where appropriate enhance the Heath for the benefit of the neighbourhood as a whole. Membership provides you with a forum to express your opinions about the Heath and an opportunity to help preserve it for future generations.

On a practical level, several action days per year are arranged for members and volunteers who collect litter, maintain paths, plant trees, clear fallen trees and many other things. In recent years funds have also been raised to install interpretation boards and benches and to improve the foundations of paths that were prone to water logging. The website is also maintained and a newsletter issued at least twice per year.

The Friends of Bernards Heath have always regarded Beech Bottom Dyke and the Sandridge Road Wastes as natural extensions of the Heath and indeed, together they form a delightful circular green route as can be seen on the map. In 2011 the Friends resolved to work with the District Council and other interested parties to sensitively improve access to Beech Bottom Dyke and to provide interpretation boards to inform the general public of its extraordinary history which is also summarised in this leaflet.

[www.bernardsheath.org](http://www.bernardsheath.org)

## Join the Friends of Bernards Heath

**A healthy membership is vital first and foremost to give us authority when we are dealing with SADC, HCC and other bodies on behalf of the Community of Bernards Heath. Your opinion counts, so please join us if you are not already a member. Your support is also needed in practical ways to maintain, protect and improve the Heath by:**

- Managing the woodland and replacing trees as necessary.
- Joining action days to clear litter, cut back scrub and maintain paths.
- Keeping the Community in touch through newsletters and the website.
- Raising funds as necessary.

### I WOULD LIKE TO JOIN THE FRIENDS OF BERNARDS HEATH

Name:	<input type="text"/>
Address:	<input type="text"/>
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Postcode:	<input type="text"/>
Telephone:	<input type="text"/>
Email:	<input type="text"/>

The management committee of the Friends meets six times per year and always needs new members who can offer some time and enthusiasm. If you are interested please tick below or e-mail [chairman@bernardsheath.org](mailto:chairman@bernardsheath.org) or call 01727 811414.

Interested in joining the committee?  Yes  No

Membership fee is a minimum of £10 per family per annum. Additional donations are very welcome.

### HOW TO PAY (please tick)

**BY CHEQUE:** Make cheques payable to Friends of Bernards Heath and send with this form to FoBH Treasurer, Heath House, Heath Farm Lane, St Albans, AL3 5AE.

**BY STANDING ORDER:** Send this form to the FoBH Treasurer and instruct your bank to pay £10 immediately, and thereafter on 1st January every year, in favour of:

Account Name: Friends of Bernards Heath,  
NatWest Bank, 10 St Peter's Street, St Albans, AL1 3LY.

Account No: 17009944

Sort Code: 60-18-11

