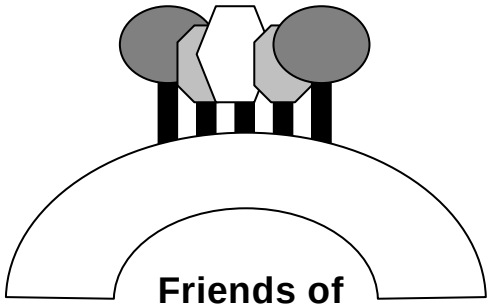

Friends of Bernards Heath

A GUIDED WALK ROUND BERNARDS HEATH

Introduction

This circular and discursive walk takes you in a clockwise direction round Bernards Heath, with some suggested detours to take in more features. You can of course pick up the walk at any point and walk it clockwise or anti-clockwise. We have chosen to start at the Ancient Briton public house because it is next to one of the oldest features on the walk – Beech Bottom Dyke – which is also a key landmark for the Second Battle of St Albans (1461).

The distance is about three miles as the crow flies, but some of the going is slow and you will probably want to stop and look at some points, so allow plenty of time. Most of the walk is on short grass or pavements but the Beech Bottom path can be muddy in wet weather. Some of that path is rough in any case but you can avoid it by going up Beech Road from the Ancient Briton to the King William IV public house.

There is a map of the area at the end of this Guide.

Car parking, bus access and cycling

If you are arriving by car, there are car parks for customers at the Ancient Briton and the King William IV pubs – they are both open all day. There is no parking at the Jolly Sailor pub. Free parking is usually available at the youth services complex in Heathlands Drive off Harpenden Road, which is central to the Heath and about five minutes' walk from the Ancient Briton. There is extensive on-street parking on many of the nearby roads.

Bus routes 321, S4, S7, 620 and 304 all serve the Heath.

Our route is not a cycle route as such, but large parts are on roads and there is a dedicated cycle route along the length of the western side of the Heath.

Setting the scene

The Heath – and our walk – have both been within the boundary of St Saviour's parish since 1904, when the parish was created from the southern part of Sandridge, and of the City of St Albans since 1913. Before then, the Heath was all part of the historic parish and manor of Sandridge, which reached down to Sandpit Lane and the southern end of Harpenden Road.

The land was probably some form of common in Roman times, then reverted to wild wood in the early Saxon period before coming into the ownership of the kings of

Mercia. They gifted it to the Abbey in 796 where it stayed until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. The land and the entire Manor of Sandridge was bought by the Rowlatt family, who became Lords of the Manor, and passed from them by female descent to the Jennings and then the Spencer families via the Duke of Marlborough (1650 - 1722). The freehold interest in the common land (including the wastes) still rests with the Spencer family of Althorp.

The first descriptions of the Heath as common land, partly wooded and surrounded by a hawthorn hedge, date to 1278 and 1327.

The route

The Ancient Briton

The Ancient Briton is at the northwest corner of the Heath, at the junction of Harpenden Road and Beech Road. It is a magnificent example of a pre-war roadhouse designed for passing trade in the relatively new-fangled motor car. Until some years ago the pub sign featured Boadicea in her chariot riding towards the sacking of Verulamium. This seemed fanciful at first sight, but, on reflection, she must have passed somewhere near here when she travelled from East Anglia on her rampage. The pub name has been preserved in the carved stone on the verge in front of it to protect the name from the vicissitudes of company take-overs and rebrandings.

Harpenden Road, running north/south, used to be the A6 and one of the country's major trunk roads. Beech Road/Batchwood Drive was built in the early 1950s to serve the new housing developments on the north of the city and to complete a ring road round it. Ring roads became unfashionable and all the signs directing motorists to use it were removed.

First detour

It is worth taking our first detour here. After crossing Beech Road keep going past the Bathroom Centre and on up Old Harpenden Road. This turns into a gem of a preserved old road based on a medieval sunken lane and with a cast-iron mile post from its turnpike days. It is extraordinary to reflect that for centuries this was the main road from London to the East Midlands taking much of what is today's M1 traffic. At the junction with the (new) Harpenden Road, turn back and retrace your steps past the Bathroom Centre to Beech Bottom.

Beech Bottom

Beech Bottom Dyke is one of St Albans' hidden treasures and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is nearly a mile of impressive Iron Age earthwork. Access to it is from behind English Heritage's remarkably uninformative sign on the north side of Beech Road. There is a footpath along the top of the dyke for its whole length.

There is much dispute about the dyke's purpose and whether it was ever meant to join up with an equivalent earthwork coming south out of Wheathampstead ("Devil's

Dyke"). The most fanciful explanation is that it was an Ancient British chariot racing track, but this is probably a case of imagination being an improvement on reality.

The dyke made its only appearance in history in 1461. Before the second Battle of St Albans the Earl of Warwick (Warwick the Kingmaker and commander of the Yorkist forces) incorporated the dyke into his fieldworks and fortified it with artillery from the Tower of London. At that time a hawthorn hedge ran along the top of the dyke; Warwick strengthened this with naval anti-boarding nets with iron spikes woven into them. He also ordered caltrops to be strewn on the ground behind the dyke. Caltrops were the medieval equivalent of a minefield being three spikes of iron wrought together so that one sharp point always faced upwards. Horses could not be ridden across a field of caltrops and in the battle a Lancastrian commander (Sir Andrew Trollope) stood on one and was immobilised by it. Don't worry, though; they have all been cleared away.

Warwick positioned his rearguard under the command of his brother, Montagu, at the Ancient Briton while he commanded the core of the Yorkist army (the "main battle") at the King William IV. The vanguard, under the Duke of Norfolk, was in Sandridge. However, all Warwick's plans were to no avail because the Lancastrians marched round the position and attacked it from the south. Later on in the walk, we will pick up how the battle actually played out.

Meanwhile, after walking about a quarter of a mile along the dyke, we reach a ramp of earth that completely fills it. This was erected in the 1860s to form the back of a rifle range for training the local yeomanry to repel a French invasion if it ever took place. There is a lovely watercolour of the yeomanry at practice by the local artist Henry Buckingham. This picture also shows that there were no trees on the dyke at that time. All the planting is from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, together with many self-sown sycamores etc.

The stretch between the ramp and Valley Road comes alive with rabbits at twilight. The medieval Abbey kept a warren, and this may well be its site. It would have kept the Norman monks supplied with their favourite continental meat dish. A rabbit from the warren was hung from the pillory in the Market Place during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 to symbolise liberation from the Abbot's oppressive management of the Heath. There are references to a warren here down the centuries and, of course, the rabbits are still here today.

Continue along the dyke to Valley Road, which was built across it in modern times, and then press on to where the footpath suddenly ends with a dramatic railway embankment.

Ghosts of the Second Battle of St Albans

Before we look at the railway itself, it is worth recording that the Sandridge local historian Reg Auckland speculated that up to 2,000 bodies from the Second Battle of St Albans were dumped into the dyke here and the embankment now covers their grave. In fact, this is not the most likely burial place, as we will see later, but it is too resonant a piece of local lore not to mention.

In 1865 there was a report of a mass of finds related to the battle at the top of the slope to the south at this point. A collection of human remains, stirrups, coins, daggers and cannon balls was announced and put on display for a while in Cheapside Farm, which is on the northern edge of the new Old Albanian sports complex on Harpenden Road. The collection later turned up as a travelling exhibition. It all disappeared mysteriously in the early 20th century, and the City Museum believes that the whole affair was a hoax.

At about the same time, St Peter's Church discovered that it also had a fine collection of memorabilia from the battle, which were put on display in the vestry. Some of this collection is in the City Museum and it is now attributed to pieces of decoration that had fallen off ornate 16th century tombs quite unrelated to the Wars of the Roses.

A 16th century mayor of St Albans reported finding a cannon ball left over from the battle – most probably at this part of the dyke – in about 1530.

The railway

The dyke is cut through by the railway embankment. In 1863 the Midland Railway Company presented a Bill to Parliament to extend its line from Bedford to St Pancras. The plans (including a survey of the whole route at an astonishing scale of six feet to the mile) were approved. Surveying started in 1865 and construction lasted from 1866 to 1868. Unlike many modern proposals, the local public authorities, landowners and business community all enthusiastically supported the railway. Nothing as mundane as green fields, historic battlefields or ancient monuments were to stand in the way of economic progress. It is awesome to look at the two largest civil engineering projects in St Albans (and they still are, to this day) separated by nearly two thousand years in time but meeting physically here at this spot. Both, incidentally, were dug by hand.

The railway did not disrupt a settled community so there was little immediate local impact. Instead it opened up the northern part of the city for development; we will see this later in the form of Sandridge New Town.

Dead Woman's Field, the Jennings family and the Duke of Marlborough

The land between the dyke and Sandridge Road (now hidden behind the embankment) was for some centuries known as "Dead Woman's Field" and the stretch of road up to the King William IV was "Dead Woman's Hill". The origin of the name is unknown, but it might be a memory of the time when the manor passed to the Churchill family in fraught circumstances. Richard Jennings, the then MP for St Albans and Lord of the Manor, had three sons who predeceased him. When he died in 1668 he left his estate to his oldest surviving male heir, John, who was a minor. However, Richard had left debts so great that the family had to start capitalising on their assets. Until the late 17th century all the land within our circuit had been commons, but parts were then enclosed and put on the market for lease for farming. This was one of those fields.

The Jennings family's problems, though, were far from over. John died in 1674, when still a minor. Ralph inherited but died in 1677, also while still a minor. To compound the problems, each successive will was challenged in court, creating yet

more expense. By 1677, only Richard Jennings' three daughters, Sarah, Barbara, and Frances[1], were left, and the estate was divided between them in that year. The "dead woman" referred to in the place name may have been Barbara Jennings and the name a memory of contested ownership after her death.

At this point a white knight rode to the rescue in the form of John Churchill, a successful young career soldier. He married Sarah Jennings in 1677 and, from 1684 onwards, bought the other shares in the manor from his sisters-in-law. It is to him that we owe the commons along Harpenden Road in their current state. He was created Baron Sandridge in 1685 as a loyal servant of the Catholic James II. He seamlessly switched sides from James II to the Protestant William III in 1688. He then earned rapid promotion and honours, being created an Earl (1689) and then a Duke (1702). We know him as the Duke of Marlborough – the latter honour in recognition of his victories over the French. Sarah meanwhile became Queen Anne's confidante and arch political fixer at Court – the Peter Mandelson of the day. They died without male heir and the manor passed to the Spencer family in 1744.

Inexplicably the Council chose not to perpetuate the striking "Dead Woman's…" local place-names and gave the housing development here the more prosaic title of "Valley Road Estate".

The King William IV

From the point where Beech Bottom Dyke meets the railway embankment, turn right up the grassy slope towards the Total petrol station. Cross Valley Road and then cross Beech Road so that you are standing outside the King William IV public house. This is another fine inter-war road house and leads us to Sandridge Road and the built-up areas of the Heath.

The pub sits at the crest of a rise in the ground from Sandridge. As we have seen, Warwick positioned his main forces here in 1461 to command the road up from the village.

Continue south along Sandridge Road.

Sandridge Road and its wastes

Sandridge Road is the historic route from St Albans to Hitchin. According to Chris Reynolds, a local historian who has made a special study of the Heath, it is probably a pre-Roman Celtic road that originally led to the Belgic capital at Verlamion (south west of Verulamium). If he is right, then this is the road Julius Caesar may have taken to attack Wheathampstead in 43 BC. Reynolds also argues that the old Luton Lane – now Harpenden Road – and Sandpit Lane have pre-Roman origins.

At first sight, Sandridge Road has unusually wide verges, but look again and you will see signs along it naming the "Sandridge Road Wastes" and listing their own

[1] Frances, a great beauty of her day, later (1681) married Richard Talbot, an Irishman who was a leading Jacobite supporter of James II and created Earl of Tyrconnel. Frances was declared a traitor after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and her lands were forfeit soon afterwards. She was widowed in 1691 and died in poverty. For more details of her colourful life, look up 'Frances Talbot, Countess of Tyrconnel' in Wikipedia.

dedicated set of byelaws. Look in particular for the cast-iron sign opposite the end of Lancaster Road, which is signed by B.V. Entwistle, Town Clerk. Betty Entwistle was the first woman to be appointed a Town Clerk in England.

We owe the wastes as we see them today, here and in Sandpit Lane, to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. The right to drive and rest livestock along this ancient drove road without let, hindrance or tolls from the Abbey is the last concrete benefit we are still deriving from Wat Tyler and his followers. Cattle were being driven along here until the 1930s and through a gate across the road. Other gates must have closed off the roads elsewhere at the entries to the Heath; Frank West, a resident of Battlefield Road in the 1920s, has recorded his memories of the gate there.

The other main feature of the road is the avenue of alternating red and white cherry trees. There are two different accounts of why they are here. The first is that they are the only memorial of any sort to the battle (white for York and red for Lancaster). The second is that they were planted to mark George V's silver jubilee in 1935. Of course, the two explanations may not be mutually exclusive.

Sandridge New Town

Quarter of a mile down Sandridge Road, we reach an open space on the west side and Bernards Heath School on the east. We are now in Sandridge New Town.

The first building of note is Bernards Heath School. This was set up in an existing building on the site in 1894 to serve the new urban community at the southern end of the parish of Sandridge. Bear in mind that from 1879 to 1913 the community's southern boundary was along Boundary Road (or, more precisely, along the backs of the houses on the southern side of Boundary Road so that the dwellings on both sides of the road would pay Sandridge's lower domestic rates). The school building you see now dates from 1906.

The new town was a den of vice and shoemaking and had a distinctly rough reputation. It housed most of the cobblers in the district and was also known as "Snobs' Town" – snob being the local dialect word for cobbler. There was still a cobbler working at 78 Culver Road in 1967. Bernards Heath School's archive material from its founding days rates a view on its open days.

The open space opposite the school was first mentioned in 1828 as St Albans' main cricket pitch. It then had to double up as a football pitch as the century progressed. It was allocated to the school for its use and has evolved into the registered common with play and sports facilities that we see today. It is the major stopping-off-cum-assembly point north of the City and has hosted military parades, pilgrimages, the (late lamented) City carnival on August Bank Holiday and trades union rallies.

Moving on to the end of the open space, we reach Boundary Road on the east and a fence running across the Heath to the west. This line marks the northern boundary of the City in 1879.

The Second Battle of St Albans 1461

We have reached the best point on our walk to pause and relate the full events of 16th February 1461 when one of the bloodiest battles ever fought on British soil reached a climax here.

As a curtain-raiser, though, this is also more or less the spot where the first ever gunshot wound in Britain was recorded. The story has been lurking in medical archives for a while but was misattributed to the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. Only in 2009 did a researcher go over the material again and realise that the place referred to must actually be Bernards Heath. The gun would have been fired at about 1pm by a Burgundian mercenary soldier (fighting for the Yorkists) at Lancastrians who were advancing north up Sandridge Road. The Lancastrian survived his wound. So far as we know, this is not only the first but also the last record of firearms being used in anger on the Heath.

To recap on the situation after lunch on the day of the battle: there had been a brisk fight in the town centre in the morning that the Lancastrians had eventually won, while the Yorkist Warwick (who had held the Lancastrian King Henry VI prisoner since the Battle of Northampton in the previous year) had deployed his army – facing what turned out to be the wrong way – from the Ancient Briton, along Beech Bottom, to near the King William and then on into Sandridge. The vanguard under the Duke of Norfolk was in Sandridge. The "main battle" was with Warwick at the King William. The rearguard, under Warwick's younger brother (Montagu) was at the Ancient Briton. Warwick had emplaced artillery from the Tower of London at the King William and on the bank of Beech Bottom to ambush the attack that he expected to come from the north. The artillery of the 1460s was not mobile so, once positioned, that was where it stayed.

By noon the Lancastrian army had formed up at St Peter's Green to advance north. One chronicler talked of 30,000 horsemen riding to battle past St Peter's Church. This number is obviously wrong but it is a reminder that, in the battles of the Wars of the Roses, the troops rode to fight on horseback, fought on foot, and then mounted up again after the battle either to flee or to pursue the enemy.

The first action on Bernards Heath was fought by Warwick's detachment of 500 Burgundian mercenaries. They must have been positioned south of the "main battle", and somewhere on Sandridge Road wastes, in order to have entered the fray first. They were equipped with revolutionary new hand-held firearms. Unlike even the best longbow with the sharpest bodkin arrow, the hand-gun's bullet could penetrate plate armour. The intention was that the first ever volley of gunfire in Britain would blow the head off the advancing Lancastrian column and win the battle there and then. It did not work out like that.

According to the Met Office, the weather that day was mild and blustery with a southerly wind. The handguns were fired with a slow match, and the wind blew sparks from the matches back onto the mercenaries' gunpowder; the already damp gunpowder also misfired. The result was a series of explosions among the troops trying to fire the weapons with possibly only the one shot described above hitting any Lancastrians. The mercenaries took self-inflicted casualties and retired from the battle. The weather also explains why there are no references to the use of

longbows on the Heath. Medieval longbows lost their elasticity in the rain and had to be kept covered.

The next phase of the battle was the most intense. Montagu brought his men up from the Ancient Briton to meet the advancing Lancastrians and, briefly, formed a frontline running along the line of the fence described earlier, down Boundary Road, and ending at St Saviour's. This was, though, only one third of the Yorkist army and they were facing the full weight of the Lancastrian onslaught. After a short period of bitter hand-to-hand fighting, Montagu's men were overwhelmed. Casualties here may have been in four figures. Montagu and the Speaker of the House of Commons were captured. Montagu now enjoyed the unique distinction of being the only leading commander in the Wars of the Roses to be captured for a second time. He was redeemed six weeks later after the Yorkist victory at Towton.

This episode shows that the lightly-armed majority of the troops could escape on foot if defeated and still alive but, once a man in full armour was surrounded, he had to surrender or die. The Speaker's presence is a reminder that members of the House of Commons were also known then as "Knights of the Shires", so it is not as much of a surprise as it might be today. The Speaker striding across Bernards Heath in full armour and engaging in hand-to-hand mortal combat does make more recent incumbents seem rather anaemic by comparison.

Finally, Warwick woke up to the fact that the real attack was from the south and that his army was being destroyed piecemeal. He ordered the "main battle" into action down Sandridge Road. Here the chronicles have two different versions of what happened, although all agree that Warwick's counter-attack failed. The more colourful version is that, when Warwick ordered the advance, a contingent from Kent defected to the Lancastrians and sabotaged the battle. They took Henry VI with them from the Yorkist camp – thus depriving the Yorkists of royal legitimacy – and left him sitting under an oak tree singing hymns to himself in glorious oblivion of the carnage going on around him.

A more prosaic account was given by the Abbot, who had the advantage of getting his story at first hand from the combatants that same evening. According to him, when it became clear that Warwick's counter-attack was floundering, Henry VI was persuaded to show his hand by declaring for the Lancastrians. The man who put him up to this was one Thomas Hoo, from Luton Hoo. The king's declaration was a stab in the back for Warwick, and the Lancastrians quickly reached his tent and rescued him from the Yorkists. They also reunited him with his wife and son, which apparently restored his powers of speech.

One way or another, it was a tough fight before Warwick's men were pushed back and then broke in disorder. There then followed a running fight northwards across the Heath, though Sandridge and up to Nomansland. The Lancastrians mounted up and pursued the fleeing Yorkists, spearing them as they tried to hide in undergrowth. At this point, although no one knew it at the time – or even for several years more – one of the most significant events in English history took place on the Heath. One of the Lancastrian knights – Sir John Grey – was killed in this last phase of the battle. He left a widow – Elizabeth Woodville – who later married Edward IV and was mother of the 'Little Princes in the Tower'. She, arguably, brought about directly and

indirectly the ruination of the Houses of York and of Warwick – but not before becoming a direct ancestor of the present queen[2].

The fighting petered out on Nomansland at dusk and the Lancastrians made their way back across the Heath to victory celebrations in the Abbey. Warwick, and a remnant of his army that included the Burgundians, made good their escape under cover of darkness and lived to fight another day.

There is another episode from the battle which may well have taken place on the Heath at the end of the afternoon. A kangaroo court was convened in King Henry's tent after his liberation and three of the (Yorkist) knights delegated to protect him before the battle were put on trial for treason. Even the king pleaded for clemency, but the queen (Margaret of Anjou) goaded her eight–year-old son, Edward, Prince of Wales, into insisting on instant beheadings. The outrage was never forgiven or forgotten. Edward was killed without hesitation or mercy when his turn came after the Battle of Tewkesbury in 1471.

The Second Battle of St Albans is best known for the first appearance of handheld firearms in Britain. Otherwise it is not much commemorated. The reason is that it was a hollow victory for the Lancastrians. They failed to kill Warwick and then failed to capture London. Six weeks later, most of the Lancastrians who had fought and won in St Albans were themselves killed at the crushing Yorkist victory at Towton in Yorkshire.

The battle was a large affair by medieval standards with up to 20,000 troops engaged and up to 2,500 of them killed. To put it into perspective, when matched against the then population of England, the casualties here on Bernards Heath that day were proportionately equivalent to those on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

The Town Gallows

(Residents of Prestwood Gate may like to skip this section.)

The block of flats on the southern side of the open space appears to occupy the area shown on the map drawn up by Benjamin Hare in 1634 as the site of the town gallows. Gallows were always situated outside a built-up area but beside a highway where they would be visible. In the late 17th century, they were moved to the west to a site off Luton Lane (now Harpenden Road) after the Jennings family had leased the land on the Heath for farming.

There is also a reference in local antiquarian records to St Peter's Church managing a graveyard on unhallowed ground in the south of Bernards Heath. It seems too much of a coincidence that this is also where the gallows were. If this reasoning is correct then it tallies, again, with the antiquarian sources on where most of the

[2] Philippa Gregory's historical novel *The White Queen* (Pocket Books 2009) is based on the life of Elizabeth Woodville.

bodies from the battle fetched up – not in St Peter's town graveyard, but in St Peter's out-of-town graveyard actually on the battlefield.

There will be no trace of this use of the land by now because bodies buried in unhallowed ground were deliberately destroyed by quicklime to leave no remains and the land has been ploughed up, mined for clay, and excavated for building in the intervening centuries.

The precursor of the current block of flats was a printing business occupying the same footprint. It was a reminder of the thriving printing industry in St Albans in the 19th century when many London-based businesses moved here – especially to "Fleetville", named after Fleet Street.

Gallows Field

Another of the resonant place-names given to the enclosed land in the late 17th century is "Gallows Field". Perversely, this is not where the gallows were sited but was the field on the east side of the road across from them; the name was probably not conferred on the land until after the gallows had been moved away.

Windmill/Heath Farm

The southern boundary of the open space was the northern boundary of what became Windmill (and then Heath) Farm's farmyard. The square of land between here and the waterworks, which we come to further on, was first parcelled up in the late 17th century and given over to three windmills that were built in 1675-6 and are shown on contemporary maps. Windmills were not then seen as the picturesque asset we admire today. They were dangerous structures liable to explode without notice and kept well away from housing. The modern manifestation of this problem is in grain elevator fires and explosions when the flammable corn dust is ignited by a spark of static electricity. We are now standing on the highest convenient point north of the town to catch the wind so, when the land became available, it was an obvious site for milling. The mills were dismantled in 1749 and the succeeding farm on the site was first called Windmill Farm.

The farm continued into the 19th century as Heath Farm and, at its largest in 1881, some 700 acres of farmland were administered from here. Some crops were grown in the fields surrounding it but most of the fields – and the surviving commons off Harpenden Road – were used for grazing livestock. The most famous tenant farmer was Jacob Reynolds in the late 19th century. He became a local philanthropist and we will see some of his works shortly. After the land was sold off for housing and industrial development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the farm carried on business as a milk and dairy distribution centre.

Second detour: sites of windmills and farmyards

Turn off Sandridge Road when you reach Spencer (note the name) Gate. This is the entrance road to the windmill/farm complex. The houses at the south-eastern end of the entry road were built to house dairy workers. The lime trees at the beginning of The Limes were planted to create an elegant approach to Heath Farm House – itself an imposing Georgian building dating from 1830.

The windmills were located in Spencer Gate and the farmhouse was where the new housing in The Limes now stands.

After 1749, the whole site was a large farmyard some of whose outbuildings were progressively leased off for other purposes after the farm became a dairy.

When you return to Sandridge Road, look across to the terraces of houses on the east side. The larger terrace with front gardens and deep entry passages between the houses was built as tied accommodation for people distributing milk from the farm. The passageways enabled them to store their milk delivery handcarts undercover.

Stonecross

This place-name derives from a large roadside shrine that stood in the Middle Ages at the junction of Sandpit Lane and Sandridge Road – in the space now occupied by the bollards in the middle of the road. The Stone Cross also marked the northernmost limit of the medieval town. This boundary is commemorated by the iron bollards set in the pavement at the beginning of Snatchup Alley. The alleyway is itself a medieval road and once heavily populated. There were 24 houses in the Alley in 1851 (numbered 116 to 139 St Peter's Street), accommodating 126 people. For a short history of the Alley, written by Kate Morris, go to www.thejollysailorpub.co.uk/snatch-up-alley.html .

Third detour: St Saviour's and Sandpit Lane

Another detour is to go about quarter of a mile along Sandpit Lane. This was the southern boundary of Sandridge for centuries. Chris Reynolds' history shows that it became the boundary in the seventh century because it was a pre-existing road. The pagan Saxons did not build roads, and it is obviously not Roman, so that leaves a pre-Roman origin as the explanation. Like Sandridge Road, it was a drove road with wastes.

Only the southern wastes now survive, and that by a whisker. In 1884 speculators seized these wastes for housing, but were seen off by a mass protest movement that hit the national headlines and was dubbed the "Battle of Sandpit Lane". The very definite boundary wall and fencing on the southern side of the wastes was a social boundary as well. The residents of Avenue Road did not want their servants hobnobbing over the garden wall with the riff-raff from Sandridge New Town, so they built the garden wall too high for that to happen.

St Saviour's church was built in 1902 as a missionary church (the parish church for the area still being St Leonard's in Sandridge). It then became the parish church in 1904 when the new parish was created. The land was donated by the then Earl Spencer, but the real point of looking at it is that the bricks were supplied by Jacob Reynolds and made from clay mined and fired on Heath Farm. This is the most imposing building left made from Jacob Reynolds' bricks – and very fine they are too (other surviving buildings of his bricks are Calverton House, which we come to later, and the City Museum in Hatfield Road). The interior of the church rates a visit as well. It is now an

international concert venue with stunning acoustics. It is also the birthplace of the folk-rock group Steeleye Span, whose founder, Tim Hart, was son of the then vicar Dennis Hart. For a history of St Saviour's church, go to www.ssaviours.org

The Jolly Sailor

Returning to Stonecross, the Jolly Sailor public house is the third of this name on the same site since 1827. The name may commemorate William IV – the sailor king – but it is also noteworthy that there is often a Jolly Sailor pub near to a St Peter's Church. The Jolly Sailor has a website at www.thejollysailorpub.co.uk

The waterworks

Just north of the Jolly Sailor there is a set of gates closing off the Stonecross Close waterworks. This is the latest of four waterworks on the south of the Heath, the first having been built in 1813. It sits in what was Heath Farm's rose garden. The chalk bedrock under the Heath provides excellent drinking water and a succession of wells to tap it were dug.

Traditionally the water supply for St Albans was drawn from the Holy Well at the bottom of Holywell Hill. There is, though, an obvious flaw in siting the water supply there because water flows downhill and the town had to battle with ingenious solutions to this problem. The nut was finally cracked when the steam engine was invented and could be attached to a well at the top of the town; the pumped-out water was then allowed to flow downhill.

The first waterworks was just behind the then Black Bull Inn (now Devdas Indian Restaurant), but the land was on copyhold whereby the lease ended with the death of the copyholder in 1833. The waterworks had to be relocated to a site on Luton Lane. In 1869 the opportunity to move back to Stonecross arose. In the modern Stonecross the building labelled the "St Albans Business Centre" was the waterworks' manager's house and the "Pump House" – now a computer business next door – housed the steam pump for the well.

In 1913 the waterworks moved again to their present location and were greatly enlarged (although a storage tank serving as a water tower and looking like a gasometer was retained behind Devdas for a while). The new site has treatment facilities, wells and a reservoir and is a receiving and distributing station for supplies from elsewhere. It used to enjoy a classic concrete water tower, but this suddenly vanished in the 1980s despite being "listed". The spoil from the construction work in 1913 was used to fill in the largest of the brick pits elsewhere on the Heath.

The Black Bull Inn

We are now in the medieval town of St Albans (it did not become a city until 1877-9) and reaching the southernmost point in our walk. At the end of Stonecross we find a little green (Cricketers Green) with the Devdas Indian Restaurant on the north side. An inn called the Black Bull was recorded on this site in the 17th century, but it may have been centuries old by then. In 1896 or 1897 the Black Bull was renamed "the Cricketers" to preserve the memory of cricket on the Heath after the new cricket pitch and magnificent pavilion were built in Clarence Park.

Looking south, the road is now the northern extension of St Peter's Street but in the middle ages it was "Bowgate", named in honour of the northern gateway into the town which stood across the road at the location of the Chime Square housing development. Just to the west of Devdas is the very large Calverton House, now used as offices. This was built by Jacob Reynolds from his own bricks and for use by his family.

Luton Lane

Turning west into Harpenden Road our walk runs parallel to the medieval northern boundary of St Albans on the south side of the road. The boundary was here to bring St Peter's Grange and its farmyard into the town. The Grange was owned by the Abbey and was a depot for tithe goods brought in from the north (Kingsbury barn served the same function in the south-west of the town).

Harpenden did not exist as a town until the late19th century, when it was virtually created by the railway, so this road has been called Luton Lane for most of its history and marked another section of the southern boundary of Sandridge.

Moving west, Harpenden Road makes a sharp turn to the north, while Townsend Drive continues westwards. The original route of Luton Lane followed Townsend Drive to the point where it turned north along what is now the track on the western boundary of the Heath that emerges back on Harpenden Road near the Ancient Briton. We will pick this up later on. Luton Lane was improved from the 1830s onwards by constructing the new more direct route that we see today; it was made into a turnpike road and renamed Harpenden Road in the late nineteenth century. The 1897 Ordnance Survey map uses the name "Harpenden Road" for the first time. The toll house for the new turnpike road was "Heath House", the building on the corner of Harpenden Road and Townsend Drive. This was situated just beyond the free-to-use "highways" in the town itself.

On the west side of Harpenden Road there is a new development called "Edmund Beaufort Drive". There is one much older building there mixed in with the modern houses. This dates from its origins in 1909 as a significant military base and was the commander's house. The roll-call there was: Royal Field Artillery, 4th East Anglian Brigade, and 1st Herts. Battery and Column (Territorial Force). The army buildings were later used as a Post Office depot until the 1980s, when all but the commander's residence were demolished for the modern housing.

The choice of name is odd, as Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset (a Lancastrian) was killed at the First Battle of St Albans in 1455. There is an unofficial plaque commemorating the event on the wall of the Skipton Building Society offices at the junction of St Peter's and Victoria Streets, but he was in fact killed outside Connells Estate Agents on the other side of the road. It was his son Henry Beaufort (the next Duke of Somerset) who should be associated with the Heath, because he was the senior commander of the Lancastrian army here in 1461.

The commons on the east side of Harpenden Road

The woods and grassland on the east of Harpenden Road are part of the registered common of Bernards Heath and are managed by the District Council and Hertfordshire County Council in collaboration with the local amenity society – the

Friends of Bernards Heath. Turn right into the common by the first path after Heath Farm Lane (originally the back entrance to Heath Farm).

The square of land here has one unusual piece of history. During the latter part of the Second World War it was used as an overnight stop by tank transporters taking tanks from factories further north on their way to the D-Day invasion fleet. It was also the most convenient place for tank transporters to turn round.

This is as good a place as any to take in the flora and fauna of the Heath (perhaps sitting on one of the Friends' benches).

We are looking at natural native woodland here, with a couple of notable exceptions. The main exception is sycamores which are an historically recent import from North America and are the "weed" of British woodlands now. The relationship between sycamores and the native maples is rather like that between red and grey squirrels – they do not live happily together. The other exception is garden escapees. Most add a bit of exotic variety to native woodland but the most dangerous is Japanese Knotweed which has, very regrettably, taken hold in some parts of the Heath. Please stay away from any that you see; the Countryside Management Service is working to isolate and eradicate it.

What is remarkable about this woodland is how recent it is. Very few of the trees you see on the Heath were growing before 1915. This was the year when the last grazing rights were extinguished and from then on saplings could grow unmolested. If you want to learn more about this process of natural reforestation, pay a visit to Rothamsted Research Station in Harpenden on one of their open days (www.rothamsted.ac.uk). One of their experiments, which dates back to the mid-19th century, is to study how native tree species colonise ungrazed land and how they then mature and develop.

This also answers another question, which is why the Heath is called "Bernards Heath" (or "Barnet" or "Barnards" Heath in older sources). It is because this is the third period of natural reforestation since the last Ice Age. The second period was after the Romans left and allowed the wild wood to take over again. The Saxon settlers a couple of centuries later cleared the woodland by burning, and "bernard", "barnard" or "barnet" are all local dialect terms for "burnt". Thus Bernards Heath indicates land cleared by burning.

The fauna here include a very wide range of bird life and small mammals. Barn owls and red kites have been seen recently. For larger mammals, the Heath boasts foxes and muntjac deer.

The old Ariston Works site

Either head north through the commons towards the large buildings you can see, or turn back onto Harpenden Road and take Heathlands Drive into the complex of buildings there.

This is the site of the Wiles and Lewis factory (later known as the Ariston Works), a huge industrial concern that was a household name in the earlier part of the 20th century, making Ariston lard. The factory complex here processed hundreds of tons

of animal carcasses for tallow and, later, lard and suet. It was built in 1890 just outside the 1879 city boundary, having been forced to relocate from the city centre because of complaints about the appalling smell. In 1911 the largest-ever fire in St Albans gutted the complex when over 100 tons of animal fat burnt in one night. The factory was, though, rebuilt and carried on. There are just a few vestiges of the complex left, but all the modern public services buildings are on the footprint of the factory buildings, and the small aircraft-hangar-sized structure used by the youth service for indoor skateboarding is known as “Ariston Hall” in commemoration.

The Ariston company and its predecessors owned all the land on this part of the Heath from 1889. It was then parcelled out progressively after 1944 as the factory reduced its operations. First to go was what is now a playing field behind Ariston Hall. This is still owned by Hertfordshire County Council. Then, in 1960, the whole of the rest of the site was bought by the County Council for a variety of public services including the Heathlands School for the Deaf, the Youth Service, and fire and ambulance stations. The Pioneer Youth Club, in its neo-brutalist concrete bunker of a building, dates from the Second World War when it started in Dagnall Street as a club for evacuee children.

The fire station was moved to London Road in about 2005 and the long-term plan is for all the public services except the school to vacate the land to allow for redevelopment. Over the last ten years proposals have been mooted successively for a housing estate, a superstore and a new school on the site but there are also compelling arguments for retaining so much unexpected urban open space.

Leave the site by walking round the eastern end of the Judo Club building and then back west towards Harpenden Road. In the ground between the two huts there is a real curiosity. A heavy cast-iron grating covers what seems to be a well, but it was not for extracting water but for disposing of noxious liquid wastes – a “dumb well” to give it its technical name.

Exit the site by the gate at the end of the huts. The remains of the old factory gates still stand there. The large round brick structure ahead of you is an emergency water tank for fire-fighting should the factory ever have caught fire again. It was erected in 1941, perhaps against the possibility of an incendiary bomb attack.

Fourth detour: sites of old houses

If you want to see a little more of this site and its history, take the very rough path leading north and downhill from the eastern end of the Judo Club hut. To the west is the site of a large Victorian house called “Sparrowswick”, built in 1881, where the owner of the Ariston factory lived. The outline of the garden and some fencing can still be discerned in the undergrowth. Further north is the site of a market garden business listed in Kelly’s Directory for many decades as an “Ornamental Florist”. An orchard still clings on with a few old apple trees.

Spinney Cottage, brick making and the west side of the Heath

Return to Harpenden Road and – taking due care – cross to the west side and then walk across the grass to the building on the track.

We are on the old Luton Lane again. The building we have come to is now called “Spinney Cottage”. When its history is unpacked, it is a reminder of grim Victorian days. Now a spacious single dwelling, it was built as a terrace of four hovels – one of which became a public house. These mean homes were for brick-makers living on the Heath. There is a literary connection to Dickens’ “Bleak House” published, as a serial, in 1852-1853.

This is Dickens’ description in the novel of a visit to a brick-maker’s family:

> “I was glad when we came to the brick-maker's house, though it was one of a cluster of wretched hovels in a brickfield, with pigsties close to the broken windows and miserable little gardens before the doors growing nothing but stagnant pools. Here and there an old tub was put to catch the droppings of rain-water from a roof, or they were banked up with mud into a little pond like a large dirt-pie. At the doors and windows some men and women lounged or prowled about, and took little notice of us except to laugh to one another or to say something as we passed about gentlefolks minding their own business and not troubling their heads and muddying their shoes with coming to look after other people's.”

Continue north along the track, which is now set out as a cycle route. Once in the woods the landscape becomes positively lunar with huge craters. These are brick pits where clay has been dug out to be made into bricks. Brick-making here was first recorded in 1440, but its heyday was in the 19th century. The process involved digging out the clay and then “puddling” it for up to two years in the hole. Puddling was a process of slowly stirring a mixture of clay and water using a paddle attached to a steam engine. The process also meant that someone had to live on site at each brick pit to prevent theft of coal and machinery and to maintain the steam engine.

After two years the clay was ready to be moulded into bricks and then fired – also on site. At the end of the process the brick-maker moved on, leaving a large hole behind. This would be quickly filled up with domestic refuse and (natural) water, creating a truly noisome environment and health hazards. Several local children drowned in the flooded pits and the miasma on hot summer days was awful. These pits stretched from here across to the railway line in the east of the Heath. In 1976 several houses in the area built over old pits subsided when the sub-soil dried out. In 2009 holes suddenly opened up on the playing field behind Ariston Hall as continuing evidence of the clay-pits.

It beggars belief but, from 1879-1913, this was St Albans’ (or, more accurately, Sandridge’s) red light district. Prostitutes moved here to escape the new City’s jurisdiction and set up shop in roadside booths.

This length of Luton Lane enjoyed another unsavoury reputation earlier in the 19th century as a haunt of highway robbers. Mary Carbery lived in what is now the Pre Restaurant on the Redbourn Road in the mid-19th century. She left a description of the perils of taking this route into St Albans (presumably from before it was turnpiked).

> “The road to St Albans was winding and lonely; wild roses and traveller’s joy twined the hedges, primroses and restharrow grew on the banks, and blackthorn and gorse on Barnard’s [*sic*] Heath, a wild place of mounds and

pits, where coachmen and footmen sat up very alert and horses pricked their ears, for footpads and fiery tramps lurked among its furzy brakes."

You may now wish to retire to the safety of the Ancient Briton, just across the road from where the old Luton Lane meets the modern Harpenden Road.

Map of the area covered by this walk.