



Wheathampstead Trail

24th September 2023

Just 1 Mile if you explore
the churchyard

The following is an example that we at The Arts Society – Beds and Herts Area Support Team have put together to show you how easy it is to do and how rewarding such a document can be for your society.

Wheathampstead has an ancient history, it is probable that there has been a settlement at Wheathampstead since the middle Iron Age, which is around 400BC. There is evidence of Romano-British activity after the Romans invaded in 43AD. The first evidence of Saxon settlement was the discovery of a burial of a high status chieftain which overlooks the village, and this has been dated to the early part of the seventh century. The manor of Wheathampstead was gifted to the Abbey of Westminster in 1060 by Edward the Confessor, when it had the name of Watamestede. At that time the manor was larger than the present parish and it is believed to have included the modern parishes of Harpenden and Harpenden Rural. Over the next three centuries the manor provided the Abbey of Westminster with wheat and other goods. During the 18th and 19th centuries Wheathampstead was overshadowed by the growth of Harpenden, leading to a division of the ecclesiastical parish in 1856 when Harpenden became independent.

The Trail:

Leave the Memorial Hall car park and turn right into Marford Road and carry on walking to the end of the road. You have now arrived at a small roundabout and opposite you is The Swan Inn, which was built in 1500 and is Grade II listed. It is timber-framed, and in the past had its own brewery and the blacksmith's forge. The frontage that you see today was added in about 1750.

Cross the road and walk past The Swan Inn, down High Street and St Helen's Church is on your left.



Photograph: Ian Burgess



Wheathampstead Trail Continued...

St Helen's Church

There was originally a wooden Saxon church on this site, but it fell into disrepair and the church you see before you, which is Grade I listed, was largely completed by the late 1300s.

It has a central bell tower which has a broach spire, notice the very steep angle. Today's spire is a reconstruction from 1865 of what a mediaeval spire would resemble.

The bell-ringers among you should note that it is said that the six bells here are among some of the most difficult to ring in Hertfordshire.

If you go inside the church you will see the 14th Century font, and many interesting tombs and memorials to local families.



The churchyard has been used continually since around 4000BC, and there are at least six Grade II listed chest tombs to be found. One grave to look out for is that of the Cherry-Garrard family in the north-west corner. Apsley Cherry-Garrard, was a distinguished soldier, and the father of Apsley Cherry-Garrard who was a member of Scott's Terra Nova expedition to the Antarctic (1910-1913).

*"...the weirdest bird's-nesting expedition that has ever been or ever will be."
Apsley Cherry-Garrard, 'The Worst Journey in the World', 1922*

In June 1911, Edward Wilson, Henry "Birdie" Bowers and Apsley Cherry-Garrard set-out to collect eggs of the Emperor Penguin. The rookery was located 96km (60miles) away at Cape Crozier. The trek was made in the dead of winter, in almost total darkness. Some days, the temperature dropped to minus 57°C (-70°F) and they travelled less than a mile. During a blizzard, their tent was ripped away - leaving the men trapped in their sleeping bags for a day and a half under a thickening drift of snow. When the wind dropped, it was by luck they found their tent lodged in rocks near-by! Cherry-Garrard later wrote about the three-week trek in his book 'The Worst Journey in the World'.

The 1.2metre (4ft) tall Emperor Penguin never steps on land - laying its eggs on the ice during the winter, and incubating them by resting the eggs on its feet and pressing them into a special flap on its belly. It was then thought "probably the most primitive bird in the world", and that the eggs might offer clues linking dinosaurs and birds. No such evidence was found - but the journey was not wasted. Fifty-years later, preserved in the ice, the penguin bodies the Expedition left behind provided evidence that traces of the pest control chemical DDT had reached the Antarctic atmosphere.

Wheathampstead Trail Continued...

Further Apsley Cherry-Gerrard Trivia

Cherry-Garrard journeyed to Belgium in August 1914 with Major Edwin Richardson, a dog trainer who used dogs to sniff out wounded soldiers and founded the British War Dog School, to assist on the front with a pack of bloodhounds. Cherry-Garrard volunteered for this opportunity, in part due to his experience with handling dogs in Antarctica.

If you are facing the Cherry-Garrard grave with High Street behind you, take a few steps to the right into the trees and you will find yourself at the back Crinkle-Crankle wall and garden.

Crinkle-Crankle Wall and Garden

These fascinating walls border what was the garden of The Old Rectory on its western and eastern sides, and they are the only example in Hertfordshire that can be seen publicly. They are built of brick, are formed into a wavy line, and are early 19th century in date. The reasons for this construction was that they could be higher, while still only using a single course of bricks, as curvy lines give strength to the structure, and there is no need for buttresses.



Photograph: Richard Burn - 50 Treasures Beds & Herts.

Once suitably refreshed, walk out of the garden into King Edward Place, turn right, and make your way back to High Street, where you will turn left. Almost immediately on the left you will see a walkway that goes behind some shops and goes along the weir, this is called Mill Walk. The reason for the name is because you are walking behind Wheathampstead Mill. Look out for the magnificent Wellingtonia at its southern end which was planted to celebrate Wellington's victory over Napoleon at Waterloo. This tree species originates from a relatively small area in California, and although John Matthew brought the first seed back to Scotland, its introduction is largely credited to Cornish plant hunter William Lobb who brought seed back to England on behalf of Veitch Nurseries in 1853.

The trees were initially given the name *Wellingtonia gigantea*, which was in reference to the Duke of Wellington who passed away in 1852, although this name was botanically incorrect and was corrected to *Sequoiadendron giganteum* some years later following much debate and re-classification. However, that first name has held, and in this country at least it continues to be commonly called Wellingtonia.

Wheathampstead Trivia:

Fans of the BBC 1 programme 'Make it at Market' will recognise Rachel Jeffery the jeweller, one of the judges, whose shop you pass on the right by the river.

Wheathampstead Trail

Continued...

Wheathampstead Mill

There has been a corn mill on this site for over 1000 years. There were four mills in Wheathampstead Manor that are listed in the Domesday Book and one of them stood here. This timber-framed building is Grade II listed, note its remarkable length. Originally, its exterior was weather-boarded, but this was replaced with bricks between 1890 and 1895.

Walk a little further down High Street to the end of the Mill, then cross the road and opposite you, built into a brick wall, you will see a Tudor archway.



Photograph: Ian Burgess

The Tudor Archway

The Tudor archway is built into the wall that borders the garden of Wheathampstead Place. The upper courses of the wall are Victorian, but the lower ones are Elizabethan as is the arch itself, and it is made from Reigate Stone.

If you are facing the archway you should then turn right and begin to walk up High Street.

The River Lea

When you have crossed the road, you will see the very pretty steps down to the River Lea, with its clear water and large number of ducks. The Lea is a chalk stream, and it flows some 42 miles from Luton through Hertfordshire and north-east London. There it becomes The Lee and flows into The Thames at Bow Creek. After a treaty between King Alfred the Great and Guthrum the Old in about 880, it formed part of the boundary between Saxon England (to the south of where you are standing) and the Danelaw (to the north). The bridge that you are standing on today was first constructed around 1867, it was then widened in 1895 and then rebuilt in 1986. If you look into the clear and bright waters of the river you should see many fish, are you able to identify any of them? If you turn around at this point and look across the road the full extent of the length of Wheathampstead Mill is now clearly visible.



Photograph: Ian Burgess

Wheathampstead Trail Continued...



Photograph: Ian Burgess

The White Cottage

Inside this building are the remains of a medieval hall house which was open to the roof, one of the beams dates from about 1490. There would not have been a chimney at that time and on some of the beams are traces of blackening from smoke as it billowed up to a hole in the ceiling.

As you continue up High Street, and on the corner of Granary Close you will be alongside Lattimores.

Jessamine Cottage

You are now walking up the High Street and very soon on your left look out for Jessamine Cottage. This is small red-brick house dates from the mid-18th century. At that point in its history it was the village 'lock-up', where prisoners were kept under the stairs. In the mid-19th century it was home to the village policeman. Its occupant changed again in the 1940s when Mr Wren, the wheelwright lived here, his premises were next door, where today you will see Jessamine Garage.

Carry on up High Street until you are opposite the lych gate into the churchyard. Turn to your left and you are facing The White Cottage. (No: 41)



Photograph: Ian Burgess

Lattimores

This building is a 16th century timber-framed, Grade II listed house whose brick frontage is from the 18th century. If you look beyond the parapet you will see the steeply pitched roof which reveals the earlier origins of the house.

You are very nearly at the end of our short trail. Walk up High Street until you reach the roundabout where The Swan Inn is on your right. Turn left into Marford Road and walk the short journey back to Memorial Hall where you will find something delicious to refresh you after your whistlestop tour of fascinating Wheathampstead.



Photograph: Ian Burgess

Wheathampstead Trail Continued...

Bibliography

Wheathampstead Heritage – wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk
Wheathampstead Magazine – wheathampsteadmagazine.co.uk
Herts Memories – hertsmemories.org.uk
St Helen's and St Peter's Wheathampstead – sth-stp.org

We hope that you have enjoyed your afternoon stroll around Wheathampstead, have learned some interesting facts you didn't know, and been inspired to create a trail of your own. We would be very happy to support you in the preparation of such a trail.

Creating a trail is not the only way you can volunteer with The Arts Society, we have Heritage and Arts Volunteering too. Just use the website below to find out more.

<https://theartssociety.org/volunteering>