

## The Alban Circle – a country walk around St Albans

Peter Osborne

### Introduction

This 18 km (11.4 mile) walk encircles St Albans. The route passes through woods, fields, sports grounds, parks and along the banks of the River Ver. There are views of the Abbey, Roman remains and other historic features of the city.

There are several options for starting points with parking, and pubs or cafés for lunch. Footpath numbers are stated where they appear on the green signposts.

This walk is ideally suited to public transport. St Albans City Station is only about 1 km from points 10 and 11. St Albans Abbey Station is close to point 12. Radial bus routes from either the City Station or the centre of town give access at several points and offer escape routes if the full circuit is too much (details below).

### Places of interest

A special article on places of interest along the Alban circle is available in a separate document

### The Walk

(1) Start at the Village Hall free car park with toilets, High Street, **Sandridge** AL4 9DD, TL169104.

Cross the High Street and walk north 250 metres. Turn R up Church End and into **St Leonard's** churchyard. R of the church, take FP22 between houses. Follow tarmac path W and slightly S between houses and greens for 400m to the junction of Langley Grove and **Woodcock Hill**.

Turn L and follow Woodcock Hill E for 200m to the edge of the village. Take FP 31 along the high grass bank on the RHS of the road up towards the **radio mast**. Turn R on FP20 behind two houses before the radio station fence (2).

Follow the field edge for 200m, then turn R between fields on FP 25. Turn left on byway 2 just before **Nashe's Farm** (often has barking dogs). Cross a local road, bridleway 10 continues in the same direction. There are long rural views to the east and south and Jersey Farm estate is visible to your right.

At a hedge line the bridleway bears slightly L then sharp R round **Oak Farm** (3). Turn sharp R through the farmyard gate, then almost immediately L (SW) along FP 49 which passes through two gates between barns and into a field. Cross the field 100m SW to a stile in the hedge behind a house. Follow the next field edge 50m SW with the hedge on your left. The path line continues straight across the open field but is not always reinstated. After 300m downhill pass through the hedge gap onto **House Lane** near bus-stops (4).

Cross House Lane and turn L towards a roundabout on Sandpit Lane. Cross this Lane near the roundabout, go R a few metres to North Drive, an entrance to **Oaklands College**. Go S on this bridleway between fields, pass the equestrian centre and animal pens. There is a toilet on the R. After another 100m you reach the centre of the College where three drives meet and the student **café** (with more toilets) is visible W across the car park (5).

Continue straight along South Drive to the main **Hatfield Road** (6). Cross and go L, turning R into Colney Heath Lane, then R into Hill End Lane. Immediately after crossing the Alban Way take next L Hixberry Lane. After 150m turn R into **Highfield Park** (7). This has been developed from the grounds of Hill End hospital and has many specimen trees and art installations. Follow the main path 400m until you see the bulk of a sports centre in front of you. Then angle half-left across the grass of this Village Green towards a gap in the hedge. Pass through this gap and cross the sports field diagonally to a gate in the left hand corner.

Turn L on **Highfield Lane** (8) for 200m. Take L turn, the continuation of Highfield Lane ignoring Highfield Park Drive which bears away R. After a short row of houses cross road into Winchfield Wood and follow the winding path. Emerging from tall trees continue on foot and cycle paths to roundabout. Continue alongside Highfield Park Drive to roundabout on **London Road** (9).

Go R on London Road and cross at lights. Continue R along London Road and opposite fire station turn L into leafy Herons Way footpath between houses. After 150m turn R on **New House Park**, then after 500m L on **Mile House Lane**. Continue under brick railway arch (careful - no footpath). After 50m turn R onto FP 60 across golf course. This is the home course of Sam Ryder, St Albans seed merchant, and founder of golf's Ryder Cup.

After the clubhouse, the path narrows between fences then under a small brick railway arch. Through the arch, turn sharp L up the steps onto the **Alban Way** (10) – Turn R along the Alban Way. On either side there are former water cress beds which are now nature reserves. Immediately after crossing high bridge over the River Ver, turn R down steps to river. Follow path upstream with the Ver on your R past allotments and ruins of Sopwell nunnery. At **Cottonmill Lane** (11) cross the river Ver then continue upstream along the path on the north bank of the river with the old swimming pool on your R. Follow this path through woods, crossing the river via a footbridge, and reaching **Holywell Hill** (12).

Cross this road into **Verulamium Park** near Westminster Lodge Swimming Pool and follow river bank for 500m, then climb steps to Causeway and cross bridge for possible lunch at the historic **Fighting Cocks** pub. The Abbey is five minutes walk up the hill. After recrossing the Ver continue upstream NW between river and lake to **St Michaels Village** (13). There are four pubs and a waffle house making this an alternative lunch stop. Leaving the park turn R to cross river. On the left are the historic Kingsbury manor and the restored mill. Ahead is Fishpool Street, one of St Albans most attractive street scenes. Turn L up **Branch Road**. Look left to restored Kingsbury Barn dated 1374. Cross Verulam Road at nearby zebra, then go L as far as **Oysterfields**. Enter Downedge green space and cross it corner-to-corner.

Cross **Batchwood Drive** (14) and follow tarmac drive uphill (Bridleway 2) past golf course. (Views back to the Abbey.) After 500m turn L off tarmac up ancient sunken Bridleway 2 towards Childwick Green. Continue on field edge (view L to Gorhambury House across Ver valley). Go to far corner of golf course by large log seat. Here turn R off bridleway towards **Batch Wood** (15) along field edge path with hedge on R.

Enter wood on path which continues broadly in the same direction. Follow path in more or less a straight line, ignoring paths to right and left, down then uphill for 500m, emerging onto public playing field. Cross field to far left hand corner N and join tree-lined bridleway 1 between fences. Go through a gate into pick-your-own Hawkswick Farm to **Harpenden Road (16)**. Cross main road and follow tarmac farm road for 500m. At Cheapside Farm turn L between barns, then bear R across field to rail bridge.

Just after the rail bridge turn L through a kissing gate into the **Heartwood Forest (17)**. *This 350-hectare space is being planted with 600,000 trees by the Woodland Trust to become England's largest new native woodland. The whole area is accessible except remaining farmed fields and new tree-planting. (See Stile, Spring and Autumn 2009 issues.)* Once through this first gate turn right and go through a second kissing gate into a rabbit-fenced area. Langley Wood is on the horizon across the field in front of you. Turn left and follow a new track leading away from the bridleway. Look carefully for small newly planted trees on your right then, after a short distance, on both sides. At the time of writing there are prominent tractor tracks and the trees are mulched with straw. Continue for 400m to where three hedgerows meet. *Note Woodland Trust 2010 planting of oak, cherry, ash and other native trees.* Turn right and follow the track with the hedge on your left for 400m to the corner of Langley Wood. Turn left through the hedge gap and follow the N edge of the wood for about 100m, then turn right on a narrow path into the wood.

After 10m, turn right on the clear main path. *You are among hornbeams and other trees which have been grown and coppiced here since at least 1600. Notice the animal sculptures.* Follow the path which curves left and goes gently downhill with the edge of the wood on your right. At the bottom turn right out of the trees and cross 80m of grass to a kissing gate. Turn left and follow bridleway 9 down to Sandridgebury Lane. Cross the lane and follow footpath 33 through kissing gates across fields to the Sandridge Village Hall car park (1).

#### **Alternatives**

You can park either at Westminster Lodge (8) or at the Roman Museum in St Michaels near (13) (both with a charge) and lunch in Sandridge where there is a choice of pubs and a shop.

At point (5) you can walk the whole length of Hixberry Lane for refreshment at the Plough, Tyttenhanger, then return to Winchmore Wood through the village.

#### **Bus routes**

The principal bus routes passing the points referenced in the walk description are:

Point 1	Routes	304	620						
Point 4	Routes	S1	S2	S3					
Point 6	Routes	300	301	304	602	620	724		
Point 7	Route	655							
Point 8	Route	S7							
Point 9	Routes	84	602	658	659				
Point 11	Routes	S3	S4						
Point 12	Routes	S3	S4	S5	S8	S9	321	621	655
Point 13	Route	300							
Point 14	Route	301							
Point 15	Route	321							

The latest bus and train information can be found at [www.intalink.org.uk](http://www.intalink.org.uk).

#### **Acknowledgements**

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# The Alban Circle

A country walk round the town

Route marked thus:

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## Heartwood Forest

