

Some Places of Interest along the Alban Circle

The Alban Circle, a circular walk around St Albans is described in the Spring 2010 edition of *Stile* magazine. This article provides further information about some of the interesting places it passes. The reference numbers refer to the walk description and its associated map.

Sandridge (1) was mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086. It has three historic pubs. In the main street there have been pubs on the site of the Rose and Crown since around 1640 and the Green Man since at least 1739. The Queens Head, in Church End just off the main street, was in existence before 1725.



The Queens Head, Sandridge

Until the 1950s many of the village freeholds were owned by the Spencer family but they were sold to pay death duties. Earl Spencer, Princess Diana's brother, is still the Lord of the Manor and patron of St Leonards Church. Parts of the church date from Norman times but it has been modified and extended many times since then.



St Leonards Church

During the Second World War the **Sandridge Radio Station** (2) was one of the top secret locations which monitored the German radio messages and passed them to Bletchley for decoding. It is now part of the Home Office Scientific Development Branch which applies science and technology in the fight against crime.

The Smallford Campus of **Oaklands College** of Further Education (5) runs courses in agriculture, horticulture, equine studies and construction. The site was purchased by the County Council in 1918 as a horticultural college. The Oaklands Mansion, at its heart, was extensively remodelled in the 19th century but badly damaged by a fire in 1926. The college has planning permission to build a large new centralised campus on this site.

Highfield Park (7) was created from parts of the grounds of the former Hill End and Cell Barnes hospitals. Nearly 700 new houses were built on condition that 60 acres were set aside as public open space. It is managed by the Highfield Park Trust, an independent charity, funded by the proceeds of an endowment from the Secretary of State for Health.

The northern part, between Hixberry Lane and Highfield Lane, was **Hill End Hospital** which was opened in 1900 for the mentally ill of Hertfordshire. Before the Second World War it had more than 1000 patients and was nearly self sufficient with five farms, a large garden and its own railway station. During the war St Bartholomew's (Bart's) hospital was evacuated from London to this site. In one week 600 casualties came to Hill End and in 1944 it was one of the four main centres investigating the use of penicillin. After the war Bart's gradually returned to London with the last unit returning in 1961. The wards were re-opened for psychiatric patients and the hospital undertook pioneer work in Community Care. During the 1980s programmes prepared patients for living outside in the community and the hospital finally closed in 1995.



Hill End Orchard

This part of the park contains a tree trail whose details can be downloaded from the Trust's website (see below)

Winchfield Wood, south of Highfield Lane (8), is an ancient woodland that was formerly part of the Cell Barnes Hospital. The land was originally owned by the Sopwell Nunnery (passed later in the walk) which was a dependent "cell" of St Albans Abbey. When the nunnery was disbanded in 1531 the land was granted by Henry VIII to Sir Richard Lee, a soldier and royal engineer. In 1669 his descendants sold it to Sir Harbottle Grimston of Gorhambury (also seen later on the walk) whose descendants owned it for the next 260 years. In the 1920s it was purchased by the County Council as an extension of Hill End Hospital. Great Cell Barnes House was extended and used as a nurses' home and much of the Victorian gardens preserved. The hospital was opened in 1933, transferred to the NHS in 1948 and finally closed in 2000. Only a few buildings remain including the nurses' home which is now occupied by the charity Emmaus.



Winchfield Wood

Samuel Ryder was born in Preston in 1858. The son of a Manchester corn merchant, he was educated at Manchester University and in 1895 had the idea of selling seeds in penny packets. He chose to start his business in St Albans because of its excellent transport links. It became very successful and its head office, now the Comfort Hotel, and showroom, now the Café Rouge, can be seen on Holywell Hill (not far from point 12 on the walk).

His health suffered from overwork and his doctors encouraged him to take up golf. He joined the **Verulam Golf Club** and very soon became its captain. He became so enthusiastic that he agreed to sponsor the solid gold Ryder cup for a biennial golf championship between the best professional golfers in the USA and the UK. The first official match was played in America in 1927.

The **Alban Way** (10) is a footpath and cycle track which runs along the single track route of the former Great Northern Railway between Hatfield and St Albans Abbey Station. It was opened in 1865 only three years before the more direct main line from St Albans to St Pancras. It was used for both freight and passenger traffic until it was finally dismantled in 1969.



*River Ver
near Sopwell Lane*

The **River Ver** rises north of Markyate and flows through St Albans to join the River Colne near Bricket Wood. It is an example of a chalk stream which is a globally rare habitat. Chalk streams have porous beds and rely on a high water table for their existence. The Ver is constantly threatened by the millions of gallons of water which are pumped out of deep boreholes in the chalk aquifer.

The springs which feed the river flow with mineral rich water which has been filtered through the chalk. This led to a flourishing **watercress industry** which has now disappeared. Some of the former watercress beds which are passed on this walk are now being managed as nature reserves.

The ruin on the site of the medieval **Sopwell Nunnery** in Cottonmill Lane (11) is all that remains of a Tudor mansion built around 1560 by Sir Richard Lee (mentioned above). It may never have been completed and later the Grimstons of Gorhambury took away materials to use in their own house.



Ruins at Sopwell Nunnery

Verulamium Park set in over 100 acres is the site of Verulamium, a major city of Roman Britain. If you follow the causeway opposite the Fighting Cocks you soon reach the remains of the Roman wall and the site of the Roman gate. The park was purchased by the City from the Earl of Verulam in 1929. In the 1930s there were extensive archaeological excavations by Sir Mortimer Wheeler and his wife Tessa. Many of the findings are displayed in the Verulamium Museum near St Michaels village. There is a Roman hypocaust and mosaic in a building in the middle of the park. The lake was constructed in the 1930s to give work to the unemployed during the depression.



The **Olde Fighting Cocks** has a claim to be one of the oldest public houses in England. The main octagonal structure was originally a pigeon house located closer to the Abbey and moved to its present site on the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539. It has been extended over the years and gets its name from the cock fighting which took place in the main bar in the 19th century.

Olde Fighting Cocks

St Michaels village (13) has a very long history. The narrow street was once the main coaching road from London to the North West and Ireland. Turning left on leaving the park there are two pubs and several very attractive old houses. The Six Bells, which dates from 1596, is built on the site of a Roman bath house which was burned down by the followers of Queen Boudicca in AD 60/61. It may have got its present name in 1739 when five new bells were added to the single bell in the church. The Rose and Crown dates from 1639. A little further on there is St Michaels Church, founded by Abbot Ulsinus in about AD 948, to receive pilgrims and prepare them for their visit to the shrine of St Albans in the Abbey. Beyond the church are the remains of the Roman Theatre.

Turning right as you leave the park to follow the walk you cross the Ver on a bridge alongside the site of a Roman ford. This bridge, built in 1765 by the St Albans Turnpike Trust at a cost of £280, is the oldest existing bridge in Hertfordshire.



St Michaels Bridge & Ford

A **Kingsbury Mill** is recorded in the Domesday Book but the present building dates from Elizabethan times with a Georgian façade added. It has been restored to working order and, with its associated Waffle House, is open to the public. Kingsbury Manor house, which dates in part from the 18th century, is not open to the public.

Fishpool Street is a continuation of the London to Holyhead coach road and has an outstanding range of architecture. It has been estimated that in 1815 about 70 mail coaches passed through St Albans every day and most of these would have travelled along this road. The walk passes close to two pubs at the junction with Branch Road. The Blue Anchor is one of the youngest pubs on this

walk as it dates from only 1869. The Black Lion was licensed in 1792 but the building dates from the 17th century. It was the last house in Hertfordshire to be licensed as a “common lodging house”.

Kingsbury Barn is one of a group of six similar barns built by the Abbey in the late 14th century and is among the oldest buildings in St Michaels. It has recently been extensively restored by its private owners. It is occasionally open to the public on heritage days and is well worth visiting.



Interior of Kingsbury Barn

Verulam Road is an early example of a bypass. It was constructed as part of Thomas Telford’s improvements to the London - Holyhead road and was opened in 1826 to avoid the “circuitous narrow and low state of the road” through St Michaels.

Old Gorhambury House, built in part from materials from Sopwell nunnery, is a ruin not visible from this walk. It was the home of Sir Francis Bacon.

New Gorhambury, which is visible, is a neo-Palladian house built between 1777 and 1784 by the 3rd Viscount Grimston. His son was created Earl of Verulam in 1806 and his descendants still live there. It is open on Thursday afternoons in summer.



Langley Wood in Heartwood Forest

The Woodland Trust is creating the **Heartwood Forest** (17) on 850 acres of Greenbelt land between Sandridge and Wheathampstead. It includes 45 acres of ancient woodland which are home to many rare butterflies and the protected English Bluebells. When it is complete it will be the largest native forest in England. The Trust is committed to giving walkers access to the entire forest and is progressively making access available as the land is taken out of agricultural use. Maps showing the current extent of access are on display at various points on the rights of way through the site.

I am grateful to the many sources I have consulted in preparing this article. If you would like more information the websites below may be useful.

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Highfield Park Trust
Ver Valley Society
St Albans Museums
St Michaels Village
St Albans History
Kingsbury Barn
Heartwood Forest

<http://www.highfieldparktrust.co.uk>
<http://www.riverver.co.uk>
<http://www.stalbansmuseums.org.uk>
<http://www.stmichaelsvillage.org.uk>
<http://www.salbani.co.uk>
<http://www.kingsburybarn.co.uk>
<http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk>



St Albans Abbey from Cottonmill Lane