

Bentley Priory Nature Trail

Text version, describing the trail starting from the Old Lodge Way entrance.

Bentley Priory is one of the best known open spaces in Harrow. Originally one space comprising the house and grounds of Bentley Priory, a stately mansion built in 1775 with the distinguished and unorthodox Sir John Soane as architect, the two were separated when the house was occupied by the RAF and used as an operation centre during the Battle of Britain in the Second World War. Bentley Priory house now hosts a museum describing this role.

Geology The 66 hectares of the reserve slope southwards from the edge of the Stanmore Hill ridge in the north. The lower part is London clay but as one climbs north the clay is overlaid by the pebbly Claygate beds with a cap of quaternary gravels on the ridge, creating an acid soil. When water trickling down through the gravel reaches the clay a number of springs emerge and form streams.

Maintenance The Park is managed by voluntary wardens who work to record species and enhance the site's biodiversity. Larger scale work, such as mechanical cutting of the open areas to prevent scrub growth, is performed by contractors.

Dogs Bentley Priory is a nature reserve and the wildlife has priority. Spring Meadow is the most important bird nesting site and all dogs should be on leash here during the months of April, May and June. Signs on the entrance gates will alert dog walkers to this rule. Well trained dogs can be allowed to run free on the rest of the reserve and on Spring Meadow July – March. However dogs must never be allowed to chase the resident wildlife or the cows; if you do not trust your dog, please keep it leashed at all times.

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Bentley Priory Nature Reserve needs volunteers. If you would like to help, whether at one of our working parties or as part of the warden team, contact the wardens or Harrow Nature Conservation Forum.

Bentley Priory Nature Reserve is the only biological Site of Scientific Interest in Harrow. It has excellent examples of species-rich grassland, ancient woodland and lakes, all in a relatively small area. This nature trail will take you through or past all three, as well as showing some of the man-made features of the site. The total length is 2.9 km.

The first part of the trail follows the metalled path, called Deer Path, but the second half can be extremely muddy, especially in autumn and winter. At these times waterproof boots are advisable.

Bentley Priory Nature Reserve occupies much of the land originally created as parkland for Bentley Priory House, at the top of the hill. Deer Path follows the original driveway to the house, and the name of the road you entered from, Old Lodge Way, refers to the lodge guarding the entrance to the park. The Old Lodge still stands, at the corner of Old Lodge Way and the Uxbridge Road.

Begin by following Deer Path up the hill through Old Lodge Meadow.

Look out for the first numbered post, just before you enter the woodland.

Post 1: In the small copse to the right of the path grow many of the trees and bushes that you will see again and again on your walk. The largest tree is a pedunculate or English oak, *Quercus robur*. The name pedunculate refers to the stalk, or peduncule, that connects the acorn cup to the twig. The pedunculate oak is the dominant oak in southern England while the sessile oak is most common in the north, although you will see one specimen on the trail today.

The other tree in this little copse is a hornbeam *Carpinus betulus*, one of the commonest trees in the reserve. Hornbeam wood is extremely hard and in the past was used for gear wheels, for example in clock mechanisms.

The little copse also contains bushes of blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* and hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*. Both bear thorns, although those of blackthorn are longer and sharper. In early spring blackthorn, a relative of the plum, bears masses of white blossom on otherwise bare twigs. Later blackthorn bears its fruit, called sloes. These are too bitter to eat but are used to flavour gin. Hawthorn flowers later, in April and May (indeed its other name is May). Dog rose *Rosa canina* clambers through the thorn bushes and flowers all too briefly in May and June. Go through the gate into the wood.

Post 2: The first Marquis of Abercorn bought Bentley Priory in 1786. Sir Uvedale Price, his landscape gardener, designed much of the parkland that we see today. To the left of the path at this point is a raised causeway, like a miniature railway embankment. This raised path was created so that the marquis could ride around his park without going through any mud. On the causeway, close to the metalled path, you can see some trees with characteristic horizontal bands on the bark. These are the wild cherry or gean *Prunus avium*; the fruit are loved by foxes. In March and April look up into the crowns to make out the blossom.

Post 3: The prominent tree with the V shaped double trunk is a wild service tree *Sorbus torminalis*. The leaves are a distinctive shape, as if the tree intended to have hand shaped leaves like a sycamore but stopped half way. Wild service trees, like hornbeam, are an indicator of ancient woodland, that is, land that has been wooded since 1600 and therefore probably never cleared by man.

Post 4: Field maple *Acer campestre* grows on both sides of the path. Field maple is a small tree or bush and, unlike its relative the sycamore, is a true English native. The leaves are very like those of sycamore, although much smaller.

Along this section of the path look out for coppiced hornbeams, mainly on the left side. A coppiced tree is cut down all the way to the base, and grows out a mass of new young branches to form a tight bush. Coppicing allows the growth of many more ground level plants than are found in mature woodland, while the tight bush-like coppice stands are perfect for nesting birds including blackbird, robin, wren, dunnock and blackcap.

Post 5: You are now entering Heriots Wood, a larger expanse of ancient woodland dominated by hornbeam. Older hornbeam trees often develop an interesting pattern on their bark, ridges crossing and recrossing to form diamond patterns. See if you can find examples here or as you walk on up the path.

To the left a second number 5 marker post sits in a shallow ditch. This is a parish boundary and probably predates the Marquis of Abercorn. On our side of the ditch we are in Great Stanmore; Harrow Weald lies the on other side.

Post 6: The metal fence on the right encloses a private deer park with fallow deer. The deer are descendants of the herd introduced by the Marquis of Abercorn. They love to be fed carrots, apples and other vegetables - but please do not give them bread, which will make them ill.

Post 7: Not many plants can grow in the dry, shady environment of the forest floor in high summer. Two that can, enchanters nightshade *Circaea lutetiana* and wood avens *Geum urbanum*, grow to the left of the path here. Enchanters nightshade bears a spike of delicate little white flowers while wood avens bears simple yellow flowers like a buttercup, and later characteristic balls of seeds each with a hook to catch onto the fur of passing animals.

Post 8: The majestic oak tree on the right of the path is a turkey oak *Quercus cerris*. The acorns are borne in a hairy cup like a bird's nest.

As you continue up notice a clump of mistletoe *Viscum album* at the top of a hawthorn bush. Mistletoe can grow on a number of trees, but hawthorn is a relatively unusual host. At the signpost, turn left onto the metalled Weald Path.

Post 9: The metal fence to the right is the boundary of what was the RAF land. Bentley Priory house lies within, but is difficult to see behind the screen of trees. From here on a clear day we have a glorious view right across London to Box Hill and Leith Hill, 50 km away.

Just ahead is a patch of gorse *Ulex europaeus*, a plant that likes acid, well-drained soils. It flowers all year round so whatever the season you should be able to find flowers somewhere on it. From this point you leave the metalled path and descend the grassy ride called The Greensward. The open land here is acid grassland, full of bright flowers in spring and summer. Look out especially for pignut *Conopodium majus* with diminutive umbels of white flowers, like a miniature cow parsley. You should also be able to find tormentil *Potentilla erecta*, a member of the rose family with masses of small yellow flowers. Unusually for the rose family, tormentil flowers have four, rather than five, petals. Later in the year (July, August and September) look for the yellow daisy-like flowers of ragwort *Senecio jacobaea*, the blue pom-poms of devils-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, and harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*, the Scottish bluebell.

Post 10: In 2012 the Bentley Priory Nature Reserve Management Committee was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to clear scrub that was invading the grassland, and this has paid for the clearance of the area to the right of this point. The seeds of the grassland plants lie dormant in the soil for many years. As soon as the scrub is cleared, they germinate and restore the lovely flower-rich meadowland.

Here the nature trail bears to the right and crosses the first of many wet spots then continues down The Greensward. If the ground just ahead is too boggy for your footwear, you should instead bear left at this point. The path will lead you back to Deer Path.

Post 11: As we descend The Greensward, the soil becomes less acid, and the composition of the grassland flora changes subtly. Look out for the blue flower spikes of bugle *Ajuga reptans* and the tiny white flowers of lesser stitchwort *Stellaria graminea*. Lesser stitchwort, which flowers from May through August, has five petals, but each is so deeply divided that at first glance one would say that the flower has ten petals. Later in the year (June through September) look for birds foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*; the flowers are like those of peas and when fully open are bright yellow, but as they open the petals are tinged bright orange, giving the plant its alternative name of bacon and egg plant.

As you proceed beyond post 11, look out for the arrow post that directs you to the right and off The Greensward.

Post 12: This pine grove is one of three planted by Sir John Kelk, an eminent Victorian engineer who bought Bentley Priory house and the estate in 1863. The pine needles form a lovely soft carpet underfoot. From here, the nature trail runs straight ahead and descends towards Summerhouse Lake, which soon comes into sight in front of you.

Post 13: Look for a second number 13 marker post ahead and to the left. This marks a sweet chestnut tree *Castanea sativa*, probably another planting by Sir John Kelk. In a good year, trees in England produce nuts large enough to be worth harvesting and roasting, but in most years the nuts are best left for squirrels.

At this point you turn right and follow the path around the lake. In winter, listen for feeding flocks of siskin high in the trees, feeding on the seeds in pine and alder

cones. In spring look out for woodland flowers including primroses *Primula vulgaris*, wood anemone *Anemone nemorosa* and the yellow buttercup-like flowers of lesser celandine *Ranunculus ficaria*. Ramsons or wild garlic *Allium ursinum* has pretty white flowers and is easily recognised by its garlic smell.

Post 14: To the left you can see a marshy area at the head of the lake. This is home to a number of wetland plants including marsh marigold or kingcup *Caltha palustris*, a member of the buttercup family with broad simple leaves. The bright yellow flowers appear in April through June.

Hérons can often be seen here hunting for frogs. In winter, a lucky observer will see a kingfisher perched on a post or stump at the water's edge. These lovely birds regularly overwinter around the lake but are wary and surprisingly difficult to spot.

Post 15: This short ride connects the open ground of Spring Meadow to the west with Summerhouse Lake. It is kept open to provide a flyway for bats. Bats flying above Bentley Priory or nesting in holes in old trees include Daubenton's, noctule, pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle and natterer's.

Post 16: This mound and another ten metres to the south (with the arrow post on top) are all that remain of two ice houses. Before the invention of electric refrigerators, ice was cut from the lake and stored in the half-buried buildings. The ice would last well into the summer and could then be carried up to the house at the top of the hill as needed. In late April through May this area of the woodland is a carpet of bluebells.

Post 17: The tiny island to the left is called Scott Island, in honour of Sir Walter Scott. A small gazebo stood on the island in the 19th century, and it was here in the summer of 1807 that Scott wrote the epic poem Marmion. Scott made his name as a poet, but later became famous as a writer of popular novels including Rob Roy and Ivanhoe.

Post 18: To the right is the magnificent Master Oak. This is certainly 350 years old, and was therefore alive during Charles II's reign; it may well be much older. From this point, bear left and follow the path beside the brick dam.

Post 19: You can now see that Summerhouse Lake is artificial, formed at the time of the Marquis of Abercorn by damming the valley of the Stanburn that falls away to the southeast. The small tree by the post is an elm *Ulmus procera*. Elm leaves are often highly asymmetric at the base. Dutch Elm Disease kills any plants that grow larger than these small trees here, but elm is still common as a woody shrub in this area of the reserve.

From here, go over the stile and turn left along the track.

Post 20: At this point one path bears right into Mase Field, but we keep straight on into Stanburn Wood. In spring this area of woodland is lovely with the white flowers of wood anemone, the yellow flowers of lesser celandine, and the blue dog violet.

Post 21: Just ahead is a second number 21 marker post, but the ground between can be extremely boggy. The second post marks another of Sir John Kelk's plantings: an oriental plane *Platanus orientalis*, native to southeastern Europe. It bears lovely large, deeply cut palmate leaves. A hybrid between this species and the American sycamore *Platanus occidentalis* generated the London plane which graces many streets in central London.

Bear right through the squeeze stile and then bear left at the arrow post.

Post 22: The tree in the angle between the two streams is an alder *Alnus glutinosa*. Alders love wet places, although they can tolerate dryer locations and are often planted as street trees. They bear characteristic dark fruits that resemble pine cones.

From here the trail crosses the Stanburn on the remains of a dam dating from the Marquis of Abercorn's time. Keep to the centre to remove any danger of falling, and take care that small children do not slip.

Post 23: The tree nearer the stream, with two boles, is a pendunculate oak, the species we have seen many of. However, the tree with three boles on the other side is a sessile oak *Quercus petraea*. This is named sessile because it bears its acorns closely apposed to the twig. The leaves of the two oak species are subtly different.

Go ahead and through a fence into Hornbeam Wood. A boardwalk on the left leads back to Old Lodge Meadow.

Post 24: You are now back in Old Lodge Meadow. In April, May and June look for the violet-pink blooms of cuckoo flower *Cardamine pratensis*. Like all crucifers, the four flower petals are arranged in a simple symmetric cross. At the same time of year look for the orange-tip butterfly, whose caterpillars feed on cuckoo-flower. Males are unmistakable, with orange tips to their forewings, while females are all white. Later in the year look for the purple flowers of common knapweed *Centaurea nigra*. Knapweed flowers are typical thistle-shaped, but unlike thistles the plant itself is not prickly.

Post 25: This is Boot Pond, so called because of its shape. In December 2014 the "toe" of the pond was closed off from the remainder to form a shallow pond from which fish are excluded. The hope is that this will allow amphibians, especially newts, to breed.

From here it is a short walk back to the Old Lodge Way gate and the end of the trail. We hope you have enjoyed it. Please send any comments, photographs, and notes about interesting species seen to admin@harrowncf.org.