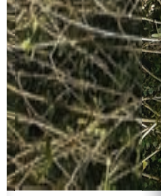




Top: Ashwood News Power House
Bottom: Sopwell House



These five circular history walks have been designed to highlight the rich history and beautiful green spaces in the area south of St Albans called Sopwell. Sopwell, named after the 12th century nunnery where the nuns lived on bread and water (sops), became a manor in medieval times.

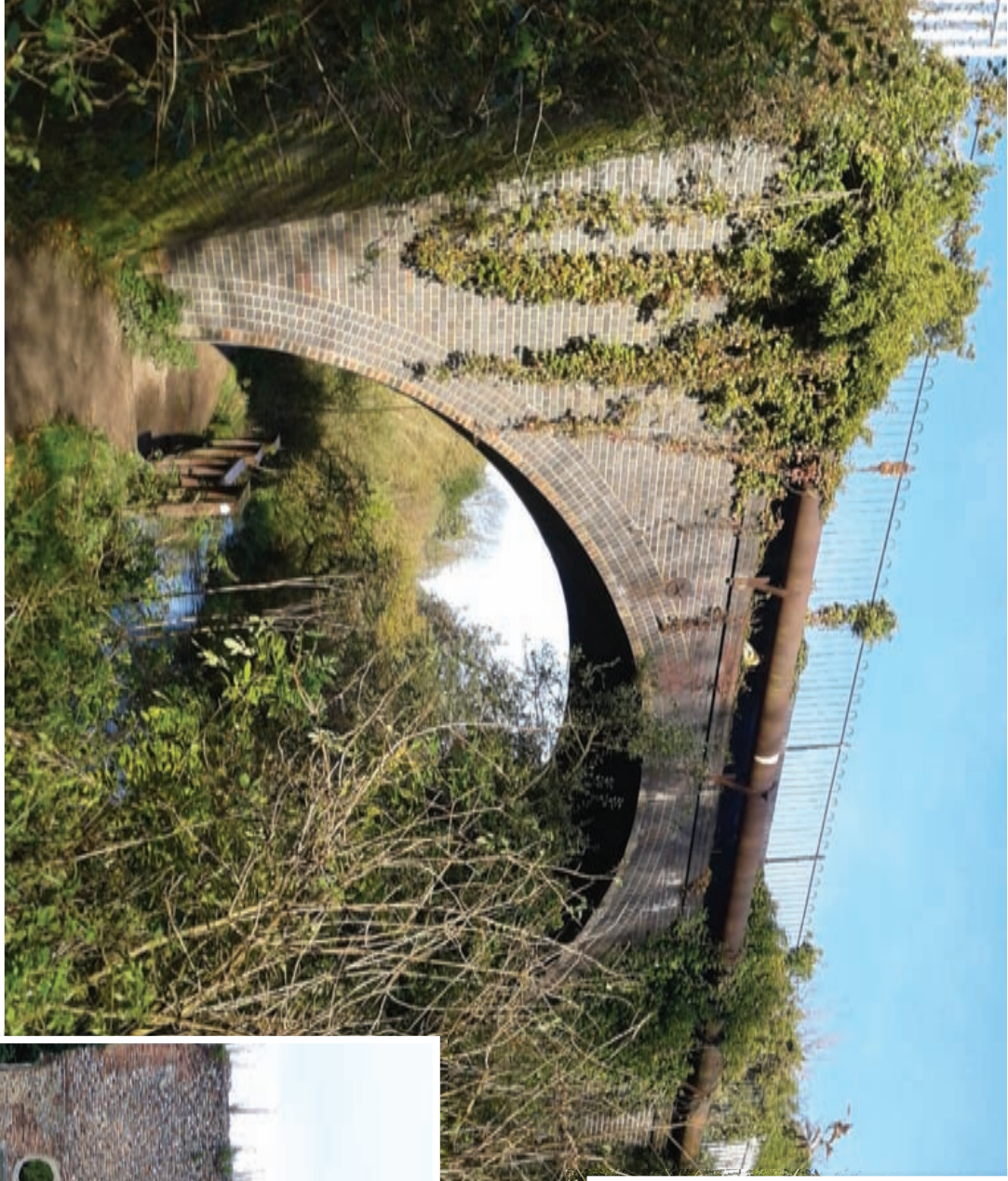
The project to research Sopwell's early history and collect more recent local memories for the benefit of future generations was begun by the Sopwell Residents Association (SRA) in 2009. The amount of material generated resulted, in 2012, in a self-published book *Sopwell a history and collection of memories* by Sandy Norman. ISBN: 978-0-9567399-1-9. It was on the strength of this original research, carried out with minimal help and resources, that SRA was awarded £10,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund All Our Stories Project. The money has been used to build a website www.sopwellmemories.org.uk and to produce these leaflets.

The book is on sale in St Albans at Waterstones bookshop, St Albans Museum and Tourist Information Centre and Sopwell House hotel, price: £15.00. It may also be ordered online via the link on the Sopwell Residents Association website: www.sra.org.uk



Sopwell History Walks

The Churchill Connection Areas of interest



Bridge over Alban Way



Walk 1

The Churchill Connection

Approx Distance
2 miles / 3.2 kilometres

Published by Sopwell Residents Association and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund



Design and Print by DIVERSE Print & Design, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire

The Churchill Connection

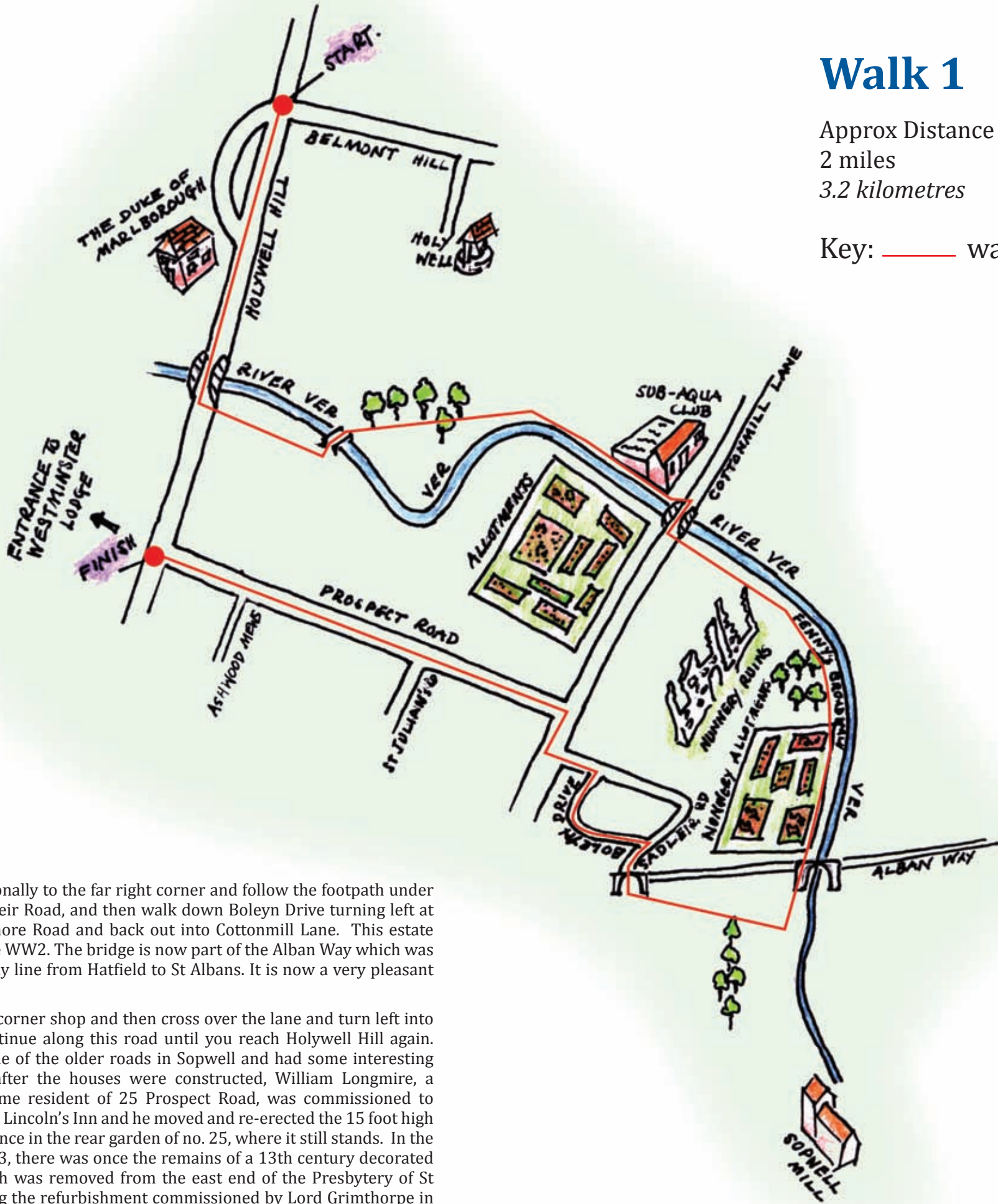
Car parking may be found in the town or in Westminster Lodge. There are buses which stop on the hill.

1. Start on the corner of Holywell Hill and Belmont Hill proceeding downhill.
2. Holywell Hill is one of the oldest streets in St Albans. It was and remains an important highway into town. There is a plaque on the wall at the corner of Belmont Hill which states: “Near here stood Holywell House. Favourite residence of John the Duke of Marlborough, and his wife, Sarah Churchill.” Sarah Churchill, born Sarah Jennings in 1660 in Holywell House, was a favourite of Queen Anne. She and her husband, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, decided to demolish the Jennings house to build a grander mansion on the site. They also extended their lands which included part of Holywell Hill itself and even had the road diverted to where Grove Road exists today. The house, described as “Substantial and well-built house with extensive pleasure grounds having lawns, plantations, open and shady walks and shrubberies, a conservatory, rustic temples, spacious fishponds, an orchid farm and stables”, was built in the centre of the hill. It became a favourite residence of the Churchills even after they built Blenheim palace. The Holy Well was once a feature in their garden. The former Duke of Marlborough pub stands on the site of the lodge of the mansion. The house was passed down to the Spencer family but was demolished in 1837. Holywell Hill was straightened once again and all that remained of the magnificent estate was the fishpond.
3. Walk downhill and take the footpath on the left which leads to the river Ver. The river did not use to be here. It used to be further up where the modern waterworks are today. These were established in 1911. The original office building is still there but is now a nursery. A scheme was devised in the mid-1970s to create this riverside walk which is part of the Ver Valley Walkway project. This walkway continues through what is known as Pocket Park which is a delightful, albeit less well known, green space. On the other side of the river are the back gardens to Prospect Road. The fenced off area to the left used to be the fishponds belonging to the Duchess of Marlborough.
4. Follow the path to the end and come out into Cottonmill Lane. On the right are allotments and on the left is the home of the St Albans sub-aqua club which used to be open-air swimming baths. Public swimming baths were established in the river near this site in 1883. The bathers, probably men only, used to change on the bank of the river and a hut was constructed to give them some privacy. They cannot have been very safe or clean as the riverbed was stony and the sides of the baths were just slimy wooden planks. The lack of a decent, clean place to swim led to a public campaign led by Alderman George Slade to construct the present building which was opened on 29th July 1905. These baths were very popular. Bathers changed in cubicles which surround the pool. In the summer there would be huge queues of people waiting to get in. Schools used to send the children there once a week in the summer months for swimming lessons. With the opening of the Westminster Lodge leisure centre the baths were eventually closed.
5. Cross over the road and join the path by the river. Before the lane became a road, there was a bridge over the river here, called the Cottonmill Bridge. Descend the wooden steps (or ramp) down to the river and walk along the path which leads to a wooden boardwalk through an area of woodland. Called Fenny’s Boardwalk, it was opened by the Mayor of St Albans in March 2011. The area is part of the Sopwell Nunnery Green Space. It has Green Flag status and is a well-managed and beautiful place now but it was quite wild and marshy until fairly recently. Divert to the right and admire the ruins of a Tudor mansion built on the site of a medieval nunnery.
6. Continue along the path by the river, past the allotments, until you reach the old railway bridge. Walk under the bridge. The path by the river disappears into an overgrown area which backs on to Sopwell Mill. Access to the mill is no longer possible. Instead, turn to the right into a playing field. This used to be a field belonging to Sopwell Mill Farm. Sopwell Mill was a working flour mill until 1931. The last miller there was George Butterfield. The Butterfield family lived there from the 1890s. The mill is now a private residence.

Walk 1

Approx Distance
2 miles
3.2 kilometres

Key: ——— walk



7. Cross the field diagonally to the far right corner and follow the footpath under the bridge into Sadleir Road, and then walk down Boleyn Drive turning left at the end into Mentmore Road and back out into Cottonmill Lane. This estate was built just before WW2. The bridge is now part of the Alban Way which was originally the railway line from Hatfield to St Albans. It is now a very pleasant walk.
8. Turn right past the corner shop and then cross over the lane and turn left into Prospect Road. Continue along this road until you reach Holywell Hill again. Prospect Road is one of the older roads in Sopwell and had some interesting residents. Shortly after the houses were constructed, William Longmire, a builder and sometime resident of 25 Prospect Road, was commissioned to extend the Chapel at Lincoln’s Inn and he moved and re-erected the 15 foot high arched Chapel entrance in the rear garden of no. 25, where it still stands. In the rear garden of no. 23, there was once the remains of a 13th century decorated stone window which was removed from the east end of the Presbytery of St Albans Abbey during the refurbishment commissioned by Lord Grimthorpe in the 1890s. In the late 19th century, a large plot between nos. 14 and 24 was acquired by Thomas Mercer, who set up his marine chronometer factory in a workshop at the rear of the plot. The workshop remained in commercial use until 2000, when the entire back-land plot was developed for housing and is now Ashwood Mews. Walk up Ashwood Mews to view the old Mercer workshop which was called the ‘Power House’.