

Watercress Mere



Sopwell Gate Lodge



Sopwell ruins

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



Walk 3

The Tudor Connection

Approx Distance
2.8 miles / 4.5 kilometres

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The Tudor Connection

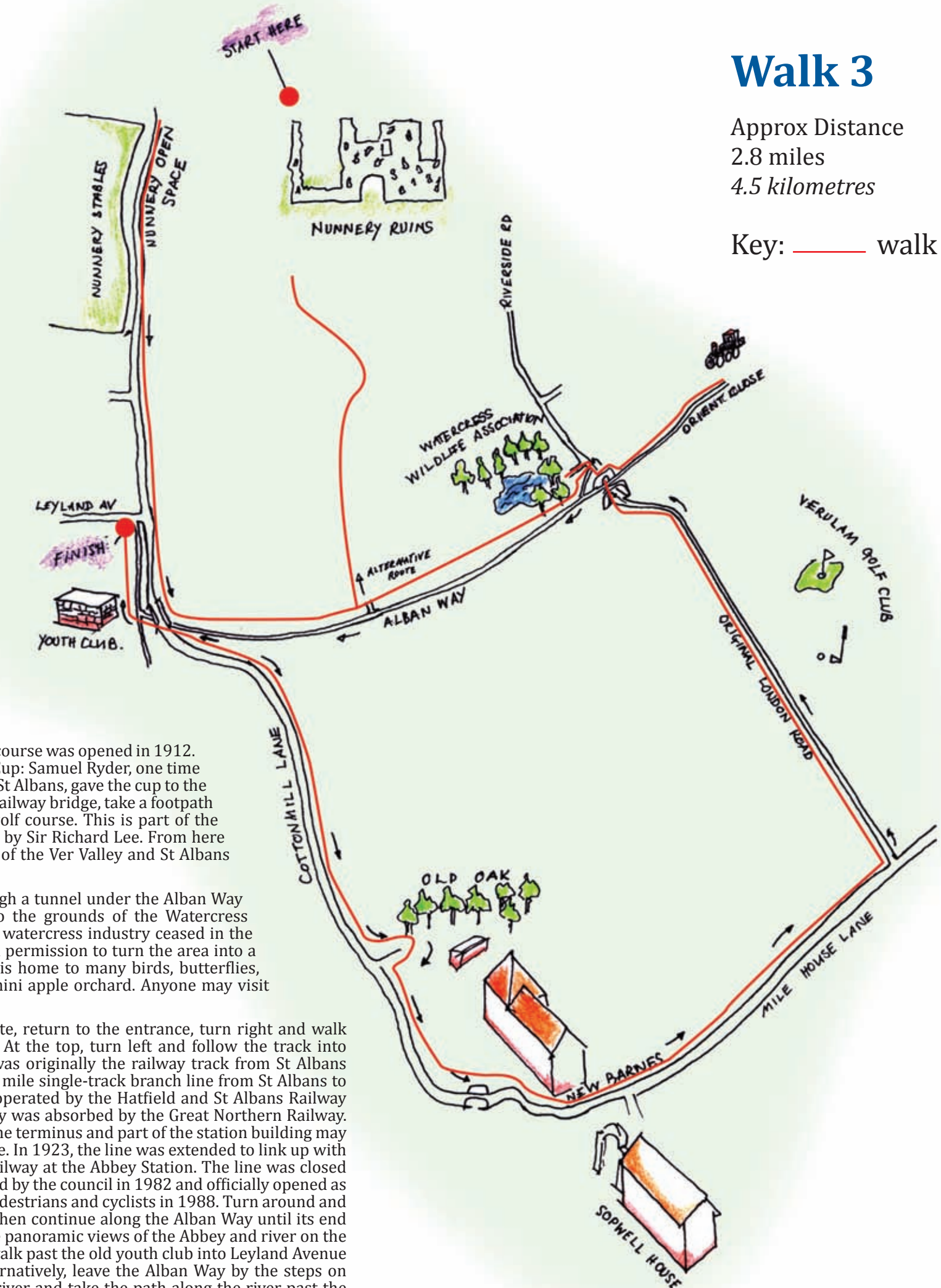
The S4 bus from the town stops just by the ruins in Cottonmill Lane. There is very limited parking in Cottonmill Lane. Alternatively, park in Homebase/Argos car park in Griffiths Way and walk over the railway crossing, turn left into Cottonmill Lane and walk over the bridge past Weymans, the shop on your right, until you come to the ruins.

1. Start at Nunnery Open Space in Cottonmill Lane in front of the ruins. This green space has been awarded Green Flag status. Walk around the ruins. These are ruins of a Tudor mansion built by Sir Richard Lee, but underneath these ruins lies another ruin, that of the medieval Sopwell Nunnery. Legend says that, in about 1140, two holy women lived as hermits beside the river. They built themselves a primitive shelter next to the woodland called Eywode, not far from the bank of the river. They led a life of abstinence, vigil and prayer and lived solely on bread and water. Geoffrey, the Abbot of St Albans, was so impressed by their piety he established a nunnery for them close by. The nunnery grew and became famous for its good reputation. It followed the Benedictine order and was called St Mary's of Sopwell, which in time became Sopwell Priory. The name Sopwell came from the spring nearby in which the holy women dipped their bread, or sops. Around 1534, Richard Lee was appointed bailiff and farmer of the Priory and, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the Priory buildings and the land on which they stood were granted to him. The Priory land extended from the original road to London as far as New Barnes Mill. In 1548, Lee decided to retire to St Albans and build a new house called Lee Hall or Sopwell Hall over the foundations of the Priory using materials from the Priory and the Abbey buildings. Later, in 1562, Lee enclosed the property to form a park and, because his property bordered on the road to London, he had the road diverted. The house was reconstructed on the same site in around 1570. It had a two storey hall in Tudor style.
2. Lee died in 1575 and in his will he gave Sopwell to his elder daughter Maud Coningsby, later Pemberton. Parts of his house were later dismantled and used to restore the manor house in Gorhambury, home of Sir Nicholas Bacon. The last known occupancy of Lee Hall was in 1793. It then became a ruin. From the late 19th century until the 1960s the land in front of the ruins was occupied by a scrap yard run by the Pearce family. Charles Henry Pearce was the first occupant of the Sopwell Nunnery site. He rented the land from the Gorhambury Estate. In the 1930s, the land lease was owned by Edgar Percy Pearce of Link House, Cunningham Avenue. The family farm, Sopwell Nunnery Farm, was in this area at this time. Opposite the ruins in Cottonmill Lane is Nunnery Stables where horses and hounds were stabled for use in the hunt. The hunt would go off on Sunday mornings through the fields towards Park Street.
3. Having explored the ruins and the surrounding area, return to Cottonmill Lane and walk to the left, past the shop and the houses, as far as Old Oak. Turn into Old Oak and enter the green space beyond. This area is used for sports and recreation. The Marlborough Pavilion is on the right. The area has lovely views over the Ver Valley and the golf course. Before the pavilion, there used be a community centre called the Cottonmill Club, which unfortunately burnt down in 1994.
4. Return to Cottonmill Lane and continue down to the bridge over the river at New Barnes. There was a working watermill here which is thought to have been on this site since at least the 17th century. It was rebuilt in the 1890s by the Earl of Verulam, whose son Lord Grimston was living on the estate at Sopwell House, although the buildings have been extended as recently as the 1990s. The British Flour Research Committee ran the mill from the 1920s and then, in the 1930s, it was operated by the Cooperative Wholesale Society, and then Whitworth Brothers until 1957. The present buildings are used for light industry and business. There was also a farm here called Sopwell Home Farm. The area around was called Sopwell Park, or just Sopwell. All the buildings near the river, apart from the mill, were farm buildings and cottages. Black's Pine, further round on the right, is situated in a 450-year-old tithe barn.
5. Carry on round the bend in Cottonmill Lane past the entrance to Sopwell House, formerly called New Barnes House. This started life as a one-story Tudor building in the 16th century and has been extended many times by successive tenants and owners. At the end of the Second World War it became a care home. By this time it was described as old and decaying. Visitors in 1967 described the conditions for the elderly inmates as bleak and Dickensian. It was taken over as a hotel in 1969 and has been considerably enhanced since then.
6. Continue along the lane passing Sopwell Gate Lodge on the right; a prestigious property now, but at one time it was a farm cottage. The Verulam Golf Club grounds are on the right and left. The golf course was originally part of the park

Walk 3

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Key: — walk

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- of New Barnes House. The golf course was opened in 1912. The club is home to the Ryder Cup: Samuel Ryder, one time member of the club and mayor St Albans, gave the cup to the nation in 1927. Just before the railway bridge, take a footpath on the left which crosses the golf course. This is part of the original London Road, diverted by Sir Richard Lee. From here can be seen magnificent views of the Ver Valley and St Albans Abbey.
7. At the end of the path go through a tunnel under the Alban Way and turn immediately left into the grounds of the Watercress Wildlife Association. When the watercress industry ceased in the 1970s, local residents obtained permission to turn the area into a beautiful wildlife sanctuary. It is home to many birds, butterflies, moths and bats. It also has a mini apple orchard. Anyone may visit and enjoy the area.
 8. Having explored the wildlife site, return to the entrance, turn right and walk up the path to the Alban Way. At the top, turn left and follow the track into Orient Close. The Alban Way was originally the railway track from St Albans Abbey station to Hatfield. A six mile single-track branch line from St Albans to Hatfield was opened in 1865, operated by the Hatfield and St Albans Railway Company. In 1883, the company was absorbed by the Great Northern Railway. The London Road station was the terminus and part of the station building may still be seen further up the Close. In 1923, the line was extended to link up with the London and North West Railway at the Abbey Station. The line was closed in 1964. The land was purchased by the council in 1982 and officially opened as the Alban Way for the use by pedestrians and cyclists in 1988. Turn around and go back through Orient Close, then continue along the Alban Way until its end under the road bridge. Note the panoramic views of the Abbey and river on the way. At the bridge, turn right, walk past the old youth club into Leyland Avenue and then Cottonmill Lane. Alternatively, leave the Alban Way by the steps on the right where it crosses the river and take the path along the river past the allotments and across the wooden boardwalk back to the Nunnery Open Space.