

# Berkhamsted Common Walk

25 July 2023

## Attendees

Rod Maclean, Howard Craft, Kevin Fielding, Mark Miles, John Rush – Berkhamsted Golf Club Trustee Ltd [sic]

Nigel Taylor, Adam Hawkswood – Berkhamsted Town Council

Hilary Smith, Erica Spanswick, Simon Nelson – Nettleden and Potten End Parish Council

Mark Somervail – Northchurch Parish Council

## Invitation

*“It is the Centenary of the formation of Berkhamsted Golf Club Trustee Ltd this year and as part of our celebrations I would like to invite members of Northchurch Parish Council to join us on a guided walk on Berkhamsted Common followed by afternoon tea in the Golf Clubhouse. Members of Dacorum Borough Council, Berkhamsted Town Council and Potten End Parish Council will also be invited to join us.*

*They will be accompanied by Directors of the Trustee Company and the Golf Club Manager on a short walk of around 1hr to see the results of the conservation and land management work that we have carried out over the years and to discuss the work that we intend to undertake in the future in order to sustainably enhance the biodiversity of the Common and to maintain it as a highly attractive and accessible recreational resource for the public.*

*I wondered if the relevant Councillors would be able to join us on either the 18th or 25th July, 2023, meeting at the Golf Club at 2-30pm?*

*Dr Rod Maclean*

*Chairman of Berkhamsted Golf Club Trustee Limited”*

## History

In medieval times Ashridge was the location of Ashridge Priory, a college of the monastic order of Bonhommes which was founded in 1283. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries the priory was surrendered to the crown and King Henry VIII used it to house his children, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth. Eventually he bequeathed the property to Elizabeth. The priory church was demolished during her reign.

In 1848, Ashridge Estate was inherited by the Brownlow family from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Bridgewater. After the First World War the family was liable for enormous death duties which they could not afford so they were forced to sell most of the estate.

In 1923 they sold 528 acres to the newly formed Berkhamsted Golf Club and later a further 5000 acres were sold to the National Trust. Ashridge House & gardens were sold to speculators and ultimately became a college.

The Golf Club could not own property as it was not yet incorporated so they created a trust to own the land. The trust is called Berkhamsted Golf Club Trustee Limited. The Golf Club manages the golf course itself while the trust manages the rest of the land.

In 1935, a law was passed giving members of the public the right to roam on the Common provided that they did not interfere with the playing of golf. (Note that all common land has an owner, regardless of the rights of access). The trust created bridleways and footpaths to make it easier for members of the public to use the common without walking on the golf course.

Although there was some woodland round the edges, Berkhamsted Common was largely acid heathland and was maintained in this state by abundant rabbits. At this time, the trustees did very little active maintenance.

In the 1950s, the rabbits largely died out due to Myxomatosis so the grassland was taken over by bracken (ferns) and self-seeded silver birch & beech. Some grassland remained but the heathers disappeared almost completely. The trees that can be seen now are all from this period so they are all of a similar age. Many are coming towards end-of-life.

In the 1970s and 80s there was a move towards ecological conservation. The bracken has been flailed annually to try to preserve the remaining acid grassland. The trust also manages the woodland and ponds. Within the woodland, ash dieback is one of the main issues.

Sometimes the Trust uses halo clearing where scrub is removed from a circular area around a valuable tree. Some trees have been removed to widen and restore historical avenues. Some are trimmed or removed for safety reasons. When it is safe to do so, they leave stumps and fallen branches to provide habitat. Our guide pointed out wild bees in one of the broken trees.

The trust also has six beehives and they sell the honey in the clubhouse.

The trust manages some ponds including one large pond called Horseshoe Pond. They drag 1/3 of the large pond every year to remove algae.

During the Second World War, part of the Common called Cox's Field was cultivated as part of the Dig for Victory campaign. This field remains an open meadow. Just NW of the Cox's Field there is (or was) Coldharbour Farm where animals grazing on the Common used to be corralled in the past.

Another part of the common contains practice trenches from the First World War. The trenches were used again during the Second World War. One section of the trenches is kept clear of scrub so that visitors can see the structure.

The Common is partially within modern Northchurch Parish Council and partly within Nettleden & Potten End Parish Council. It does not touch Berkhamsted but is clearly an important amenity for the town.

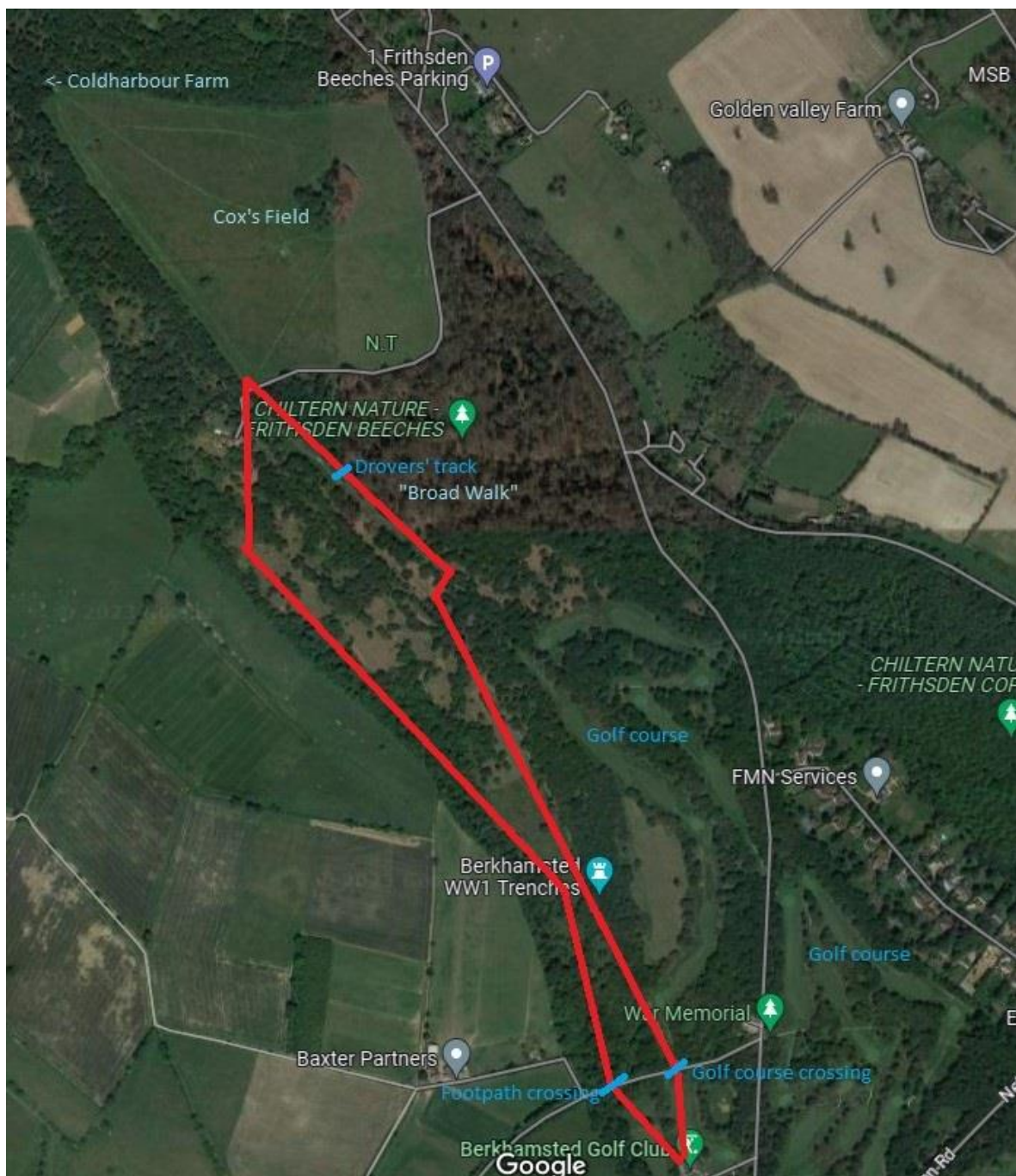
The trust has very little regular income other than wayleaves for utilities so it relies on donations from government and non-government bodies to fund most of the conservation work.

## The Walk

We took a footpath from the back of the club house down through the woods to New Road. We crossed the road and walked up through the woods to the First World War Trenches.

From there we walked across the lower side of the acid grassland and then up to the corner of Cox's Field. The grassland must be actively managed to remove bracken.

From Cox's field, we turned back towards the club and walked SE along an avenue which is a historical drovers' path called Broad Walk. From the end of Broad Walk, we turned SW back to the open grassland. We walked along the upper side of the grassland then returned to the club via the 18<sup>th</sup> hole which crosses New Road. The road is in a dip and there is a dense tall hedge just before it to ensure that golf balls are very unlikely to hit any vehicles.



On the advice of some agencies, Broad Walk was widened some years ago to restore its original width. This required bringing in machinery to remove the overhanging trees on each side. There was unusually heavy rain during this work and the machinery gouged up some areas. Unfortunately, a representative of another agency happened to visit during this work and was so appalled by the mess that they withdrew their grant. After the ground recovered, everyone agreed that it was the right thing to do and funding was restored a few years later.

Along Broad Walk, the boundary with the National Trust is about 30m inside the wood. The boundary is not clearly defined nowadays because it was originally defined as following a footpath. The footpath meandered over the years and eventually disappeared.

The Golf Club Trust and the National Trust cooperate to ensure that they are working towards the same ends so the precise location of the boundary is not important.

## The Future

The trust is looking at two projects for the future.

### Conservation Grazing

They are looking at mob grazing to keep the bracken down instead of using mechanical flailing. A herd of cattle would eat the grass and trample the bracken. The cattle are heavy enough to break the stems of the bracken. Each area would be intensively grazed once or twice per year.

It would not be appropriate to put up fences on the Common but it can be divided into virtual fields defined by GPS collars. The GPS collars buzz when cattle approach the edge of the "field" and give a mild electric shock if they reach the boundary. The cattle quickly learn to avoid the boundary area altogether.

About 20 cattle would be required. The collars cost £500 each so about £10,000 is required in total.

They would start with a smaller scale trial.

### Mob grazing Q&A

#### *How long do the collars last?*

The collars are quite robust but there may be more wear & tear where there are trees which could rip them off. The expensive part is the GPS module which can generally be recovered and fitted to a new collar. (It is not mentioned what happens to the uncollared animal!)

#### *Who will provide the cattle?*

The trustees took advice from a grazier. Surprisingly, the grazier is not particularly interested in the free grazing but is happy to provide the animals if the Trust provides the collars.

### Signed Walks

The trust would like to create two signed walks to facilitate public access to the Common. Each walk would have a large sign with a map plus some marker posts to indicate the route.

This would require an investment of a few hundred pounds for each of two walks. £1000 total?

### Signed walks Q&A

#### *Where do people park?*

Good question. There is no official car park.

- Some people park in the council storage area at the top of New Road but this is not an official car park.
- Some people park on New Road itself but it is not really suitable.
- Some people park near the houses on the Common.
- Some park at the Golf Club but this is not allowed for non-members.
- Some people walk up from Berkhamsted.

This could become more of an issue if more people are attracted to the Common.

## The Golf Club

Accompanying us on the talk was Howard Craft who is the professional manager of Berkhamsted Golf Club. The club used to be run by the club captain who changes regularly. The professional manager provides more continuity.

Howard said that the club is thriving. Although the car park was significantly extended quite recently, it was full on this Thursday afternoon.

Behind the car park is the old club house which is now used for staff accommodation(?). There are also some outbuildings there which are used to store maintenance equipment.