



The countryside charity
Hertfordshire

CPRE Hertfordshire Walk The Ver Valley and Bricket Wood

This walk is a linear route linking stations on the Abbey railway line between Watford and St Albans, following the River Ver Trail. The shorter route between St Albans Abbey station and either Park Street station or How Wood station is 3 miles. The entire route to Bricket Wood station from St Albans is just under 7 miles. Much of the route runs close to the River Ver, passing numerous historic features including water mills. The photo below is looking upstream just below Sopwell Bridge.



Trains run regularly on the Abbey line from Watford Junction station to St Albans Abbey station, with an end-to-end journey time of 16 minutes. For timetables visit abfly.org.uk. You might want to note the times of possible return trains before setting out.

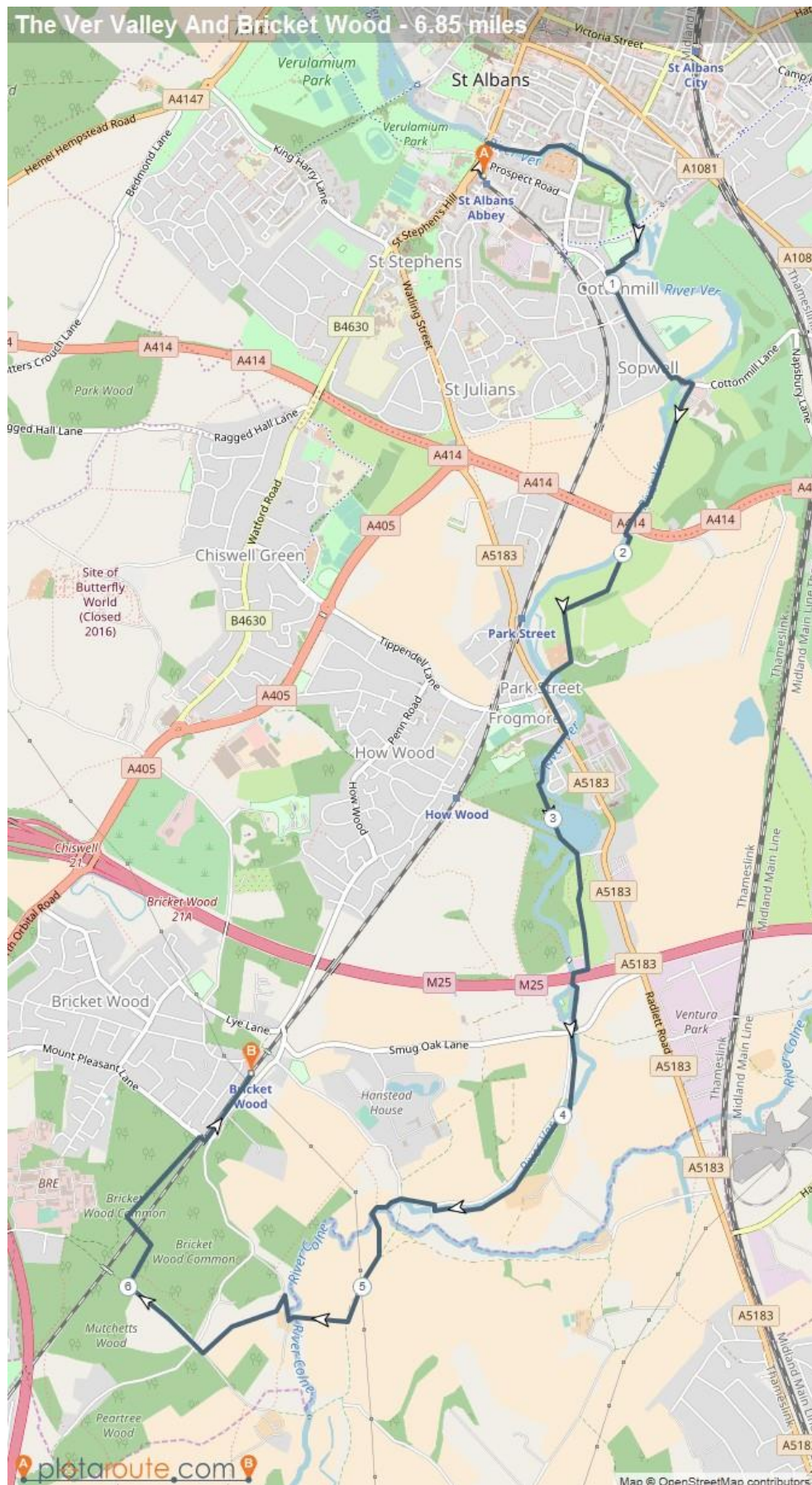
Alternatively there are numerous car parks in St Albans City centre.

The walk described begins close to St Albans Abbey station at the foot of Holywell Hill. It follows the River Ver Trail for much of the route before a short climb to reach Bricket Wood Common near the end of the longer route. The River Ver Trail is mostly close to the river, and in places it can get wet underfoot in winter and after rain, so appropriate footwear is advised. Much of the route is reasonably sheltered and ideal for a winter walk.

In Park Street there are various options for refreshments.

There are no stiles. Alongside the river and also in the area of flooded gravel workings in the vicinity of Park Street and Frogmore be aware of open and deep water if you have children or dogs.

The River Ver is one of Hertfordshire's chalk streams and is fed by springs flowing out from the underlying chalk. The full length of the River Ver Trail follows the river for 17 miles from its source near Markyate to the confluence with the River Colne.



North is at the top of the map

To begin the walk: from St Albans Abbey station walk the short distance to the main road, then turn right to go down to the bridge over the River Ver at the foot of Holywell Hill (there was once a well here used by the monks of St Albans Abbey). You will see the Cathedral on the hillside opposite. You will be following the River Ver Trail for most of this route, marked by distinctive roundels (see photo right).

Just before the river turn right onto the River Ver Trail alongside the river. You immediately enter a quieter green space despite being only a short distance from the city centre.

Continue alongside the river, cross the footbridge and follow the path.

You will soon reach Cottonmill Bridge on Cottonmill Lane, where one of the many watermills which once operated on the river Ver produced cotton goods in the 19th century. Later the structure and adjacent river became a public swimming pool, and the modern pool is now used by a sub aqua club.

Cross the road and continue along the path to the right of the river (see photo right).

The route here runs through the Sopwell Nunnery green space, with the river to the left flowing between fringing trees and vegetation (see photo right). A nunnery was founded here in around 1140. A prioress, Dame Juliana Berners (born 1388) is linked to *The Boke of Seynt Albans* - a later edition of 1486 features the first colour printing in England.

Sir Richard Lee (died 1575) acquired the nunnery site after the dissolution of the monasteries and remodelled the buildings into a house he called Lee Hall. The ruins on the site today are a short distance to the right of the path: they are the remnants of a later house, also built by Sir Richard (see photo right). Continue along the River Ver Trail which in places runs along a boardwalk through wet riverside woodland.

The path runs under the bridge (see photo right) built to carry the railway from St Albans to Hatfield which opened in 1865 and closed to passenger traffic in 1951. The route of the disused line is now the Alban Way for walkers and cyclists.

On the next section of the route the River Ver Trail fingerposts help with route finding.



Beyond the bridge go straight ahead across the grassy space, with a view through the trees to another former watermill, Sopwell Mill, which at different times in its history produced flour, silk and paper (see photo right).

Follow the mown grass around to the right, then turn left just beyond the children's playground ahead, to reach a lane. Turn right onto the lane, then left when you reach the residential road ahead (Cottonmill Lane).



A short detour along the side road called 'Old Oak' brings you to a recreation ground: here the river Ver curves round a promontory of higher ground, with views of St Albans Cathedral (see photo right).



Continue along Cottonmill Lane to the bottom of the hill, then turn left and walk around the corner towards New Barnes Mill and Sopwell Bridge (see photo right). There are views across the riverside meadows to the right of the lane. The mill occupies an ancient mill site, and continued to grind corn until the Second World War. Cross the second bridge (over the millstream) and turn right onto the River Ver Trail.



Continue on the path alongside the river. At the time of test walking this route there were Little Egrets (white herons) feeding in the shallows of the old millstream (see photo right). Also during the test walk there were restoration works in progress downstream from here, to restore the channel of this vulnerable chalk stream, improve flows and stop damage to the bankside vegetation from grazing cattle.



The riverside meadows on both sides of the A414 road are a county wildlife site, designated due to the plants of damp grassland found here. Look out for the pale pink cuckoo flower or lady's smock in early summer (which is rich in vitamin C and once used as a remedy against scurvy). Keep near the river (see photo right) to reach the footbridge. Cross to the other bank, then turn left to go under the A414 road.



At the far side of the road, bear left over the bridge, go through the kissing gate (see photo right), then turn right to keep close to the left-hand side of the river. Look out for kingfishers here.



This section crossing the riverside meadows may be wet after rain and in winter, and also muddy in places.



The river banks here are being narrowed to improve river flows (see photo left). The path gradually moves away from the river across the meadow, heading for the trees on slightly higher ground, and the line of wires and posts (see photo right).



Eventually the path turns left at a waymark (see photo left) and heads for the kissing gate in the tall hedge (see photo right), keeping to the right of a line of trees on an old bank. Go through the gate.



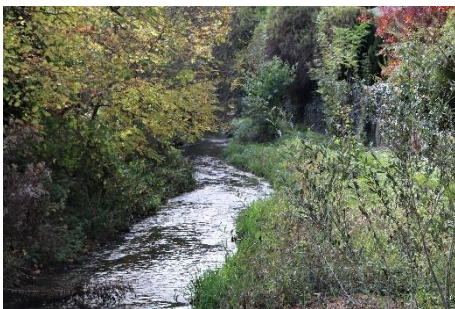
Keep on the path with allotments to the right. At the road (Burydell Lane) turn right (see photo left), cross the river again and walk to the main road in Park Street. You pass another former mill (see photo right) which produced flour until 1921. It was then used to grind animal bones for glue, creating a terrible smell.



You are now in Park Street village alongside the old Roman Watling Street, later the A5 (now the A5183). To finish the walk here turn right to reach Park Street station about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile along the road, or cross the road, turn left and then right into Park Street Lane and follow this road for just over $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to reach How Wood station.

There were once extensive watercress beds on the edge of Park Street. The Abbey line carried the cress to the London market, hence its old nickname of 'the watercress line'.

To continue the walk to Bricket Wood station (approx. 4 miles): cross the road, turn left and walk alongside the road to the river bridge, then turn right to continue downstream on the River Ver Trail.



The path is on the right bank (see photo left). The route runs through an area which was heavily altered by sand and gravel extraction during the 1950s. Flooded pits (managed as fishing lakes) are surrounded by wet woodland (see photo right).





Follow the Trail waymarks and keep on the main surfaced path: keeping right at this point in the photo left. Eventually the path crosses the river again and goes through a small car park (see photo right).



Go up the steps and through the kissing gate on the far side of the car park (see photo left). You are now in an area of restored gravel workings which are gradually being colonised by plants like teasel. Keep straight towards the M25 in the distance (see photo right).



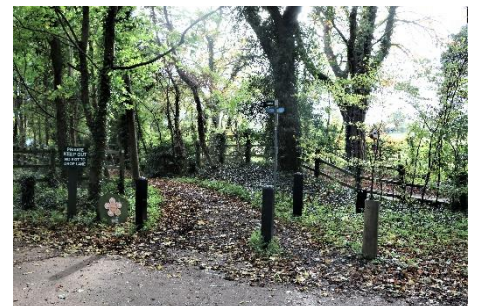
Close to the M25 turn right at the metal hoarding to follow the signs under the motorway (see photo right).



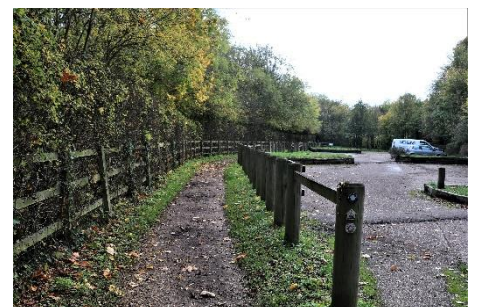
Even before you emerge from under the motorway Moor Mill comes into view, a striking contrast between new and old (see photo right). The present mill buildings date from 1700, although there has been a mill here for much longer, possibly since Saxon times. The mill is now a restaurant. Keeping the mill buildings to the right head along Moor Mill Lane to the junction with Smug Oak Lane.



Turn right to cross the bridge over the river, then immediately after the bridge turn left onto the bridleway which crosses a small triangle of land and a drive. Walk between the low posts (see photo right) and stay on the bridleway.



Go alongside the car park (see photo right). Beyond the car park the bridleway joins the Riverside Way, owned by Hertfordshire County Council, which is a surfaced route running alongside the river for $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. The surrounding area was worked for gravel in the 1970s when the course of the Ver was moved. This is a good place to look for species associated with rivers including damselflies, kingfishers, brown trout and the white flowers of water crowfoot which float on the water's surface in summer.





Continue along the Riverside Way (see photo left). Eventually you will reach a bridge (see photo right). Cross this and at the lane ahead (Drop Lane) turn left.



Continue along Drop Lane and in a short distance you will see some stepping stones across the river (see photo right). You don't need to cross the river here! Keep on the right hand side of the river and where the lane bends sharply to the right go straight ahead onto the public footpath which follows the river, with riverside vegetation to your left and a field on the right.



Very soon you will reach the confluence of the Ver with the river Colne (see photo right). The Ver flows into the Colne from the left in this view. In summer tall vegetation lines the banks and if the flow is low the confluence is easy to miss! The Colne is one of Hertfordshire's principal rivers. Its main source is in North Mymms Park south of Hatfield and many places along its course include 'Colney' in their names. There are other headwaters rising in Hatfield and also to the south.



The Ver appears to be the larger of the two rivers but the watercourse continues as the Colne. This may be because the Colne was always a muddier river and seemed to dominate the clear waters of the Ver. The River Ver Trail ends here. It's possible to continue alongside the River Colne on the Ver Colne Valley Walk, which is marked on Ordnance Survey maps but not waymarked.



To continue the walk cross the footbridge just beyond the confluence (see photo left) and cross the field ahead following the trodden path to the gap in the hedge on the far side. Turn right onto the green lane which may be muddy (see photo right).



When you get to the public footpath on the track leading to Little Munden Equestrian Livery Yard (see photo left) walk towards the yard. Just before the buildings you will cross the Colne again. Go past the first building then turn right to walk between the buildings (see photo right).





Take the public footpath to the left (see photo left) along the track which bends to the left and climbs the short hill. The track continues between fences and eventually meets a gated road just to the left of a house and garden (see photo right).



Turn right onto a short stretch of the road to a crossroads. Go ahead past the low posts to reach Bricket Wood Common (see photo right). For a short distance you will now be on the Hertfordshire Way, heading in the clockwise direction as indicated by the roundel. The 173 acre common is a site of special scientific interest (SSSI), valued because the area includes an expanse of now rare lowland heath. There is also a mosaic of other habitats, including ponds and ancient bluebell woodland, and the whole area is rich in wildlife.



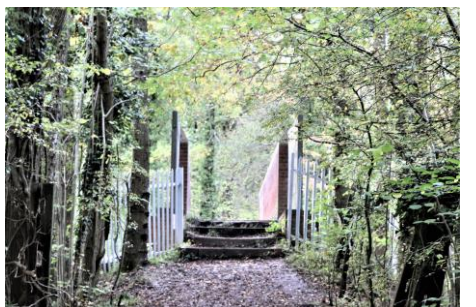
The common is of geological interest too. The ice sheet which around 450,000 years ago extended into what is now Hertfordshire reached as far as here, the south-western limit of any ice advance in the county. The ice left behind deposits of sticky boulder clay and soils here are infertile and poorly-drained, not ideal for ploughing. Instead the area was grazing land 'in common' for animals from the nearby hamlets of Smug Oak and Old Bricket Wood and supplied fuel wood and building timber. A small herd of cattle still grazes here as part of the management of the common for conservation.



Keep going straight ahead to pass through a gate (see photo left). A short distance further on turn right at the waymark post and take the public footpath through the woodland: in places there are boardwalks over wet ground (see photo right).



When you get to the ramp up to a boardwalk crossing the path, turn left (see photo left) and follow the footpath over the bridge crossing the railway line (see photo right).





At the far side of the bridge turn right at the crossing of paths onto the public bridleway, marked by blue arrows (see photo left). Continue through the wood on this route (see photo right).



In approximately one third of a mile the bridleway reaches the edge of the wood. The last section runs alongside old hornbeam and other trees (see photo right - looking back along the route just walked).



When you reach the road by the railway bridge (see photo right), cross the road onto the pavement opposite, looking and listening for approaching traffic. Turn right to go under the bridge and follow the path through the small triangle of vegetation at the far side. The route then runs along the pavement beside the road. Continue for approximately one third of a mile to reach Bricket Wood station.



If you have enjoyed this walk, please consider supporting CPRE Hertfordshire in our efforts to protect and celebrate the Hertfordshire countryside for everyone to enjoy. Our website www.cpreherts.org.uk contains more information about our work and how you can donate and perhaps volunteer.

This route was last walked by CPRE in October 2019.

Note: all walkers do so at their own risk. Suitable footwear and clothing are recommended.

CPRE Hertfordshire is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, registered charity no. 1162419, address: 31a Church Street, Welwyn, AL6 9LW, tel: 01438 717587.

We are the county branch of CPRE - The countryside charity (previously known as the Campaign to Protect Rural England).