

Ramble 'round the Rye'

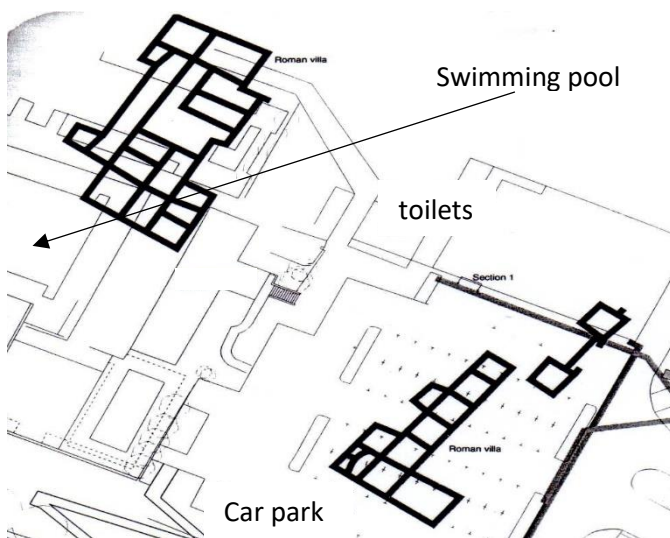
The Rye and Holywell Mead Heritage Trail

In memory of Dr Frances Alexander 6th November 1935 - 7th September 2020

Start at the car park, go to the corner of the Lido building, next to where the toilets are today.

Roman Villa

Beneath this corner of the swimming pool buildings, near to where the entrance sign to the swimming pool is today, was the entrance to the Roman villa, built around AD150. It was a grand, luxurious building, 30m wide and 20m deep with mosaic floors and underfloor heating. It is likely that it was rich Britons that lived and farmed here, copying the Roman way of life. There would have been other buildings on the estate where workers and slaves lived. The location is like many other villa estates in the Chilterns, next to a natural spring or river, with good transport to supply produce to the cities of Verulamium (St Albans) and London.



Half way across today's car park was a separate, elaborate bathhouse, similar to a modern spa. It had three heated rooms, a warm room or dressing room, a cold room and swimming pool with painted frescos on the wall. Bathing was an important social activity for Romans.

There is evidence of further buildings to the north of the Lido. This is marked on old maps as 'the fortress'. Could this be a temple to worship the god of the 'holy well' that is thought to have already been established in Celtic Iron Age times, in the late prehistoric

period, before the Romans arrived.

There are remains of villas in other valleys across the Chilterns. For example: Latimer Villa in the Chess Valley and Yewdon and Hambledon Villas in the Hambledon valley. Archaeologists believe that many more are still to be discovered in the Chilterns.

Cross the car park carefully and walk up the path or steps to the raised lake, known as The Dyke. Turn left and walk along here to the waterfall.

Dyke and Waterfall

The Dyke was built on the site of the old road to Windsor and Maidenhead. In 1762, Lord Shelburne who lived in Loakes Manor, later renamed Wycombe Abbey, persuaded the Borough

that he should divert the road to the north of the Rye, where the London Road is still today. This enabled him to employ Capability Brown, a famous British landscape gardener, to design his estate and create a long artificial lake, a waterfall and a grotto. The Dyke is fed by natural springs which originate upstream of Wycombe Abbey School. It is a separate watercourse to the River Wye. In 1923 the Marquis of Lincolnshire (formerly 3rd Lord Carrington) who later lived in Wycombe Abbey gave The Dyke to the town in memory of his son Viscount Wendover, who died in 1915 in World War 1. The tree-lined path on the south side of The Dyke is still known as Wendover Way.

Pause to enjoy the view from the top of the waterfall, then take the path down to the bottom.

OR you can choose to extend your trail by taking the steep path to the right of the waterfall up to

Keep Hill Woods

There is a large bank and ditch at the top of the hill which was thought to be the remains of an Iron Age Hillfort. Arrowheads and fragments of an axe head have been found on the hill and are thought to date to the Bronze Age (2300BC – 800BC). In 1827 a boy found a hollowed-out flint that contained 11 gold coins that had been buried between 20BC and AD10, showing that people were living in the area from at least the late Bronze Age and Iron Age (1000BC-43AD) before the Romans arrived in the area.



Two gold coins, similar to those found on Keep Hill, dated to about 20BC-AD10

Follow the edge of the 'Back Stream'.

Note the brick wall that is partly buried under the grass. It is the edge of the Shelburne (later Carrington) Estate when The Dyke was still in their grounds. You can see the original edge of the estate on the 1886 map.

Now head north and walk across the grassed area towards Bassetsbury Manor. Look right. The area to the east of Holywell Mead is known as **Marsh Green** and used to be a millpond for **Marsh Green Mill**, believed to have been built in 1759 as a new paper mill.

Marsh Green Mill and the Mills of High Wycombe

There were once over 30 mills along the River Wye. They were used to grind corn into flour, make paper, full cloth (wash and thicken it) and power saw mills.

Marsh Green House with the mill pond of Marsh Green Mill, corner of Chestnut Avenue, 1890. Copyright High Wycombe Library, source SWOP website



OR if you would like to extend your walk, you can cross Keep Hill Road, turn left and cross over Bassetsbury Lane and turn down Bowden Lane to visit the springs.

There are also number of interesting buildings in this area: Marsh Green House, Rosedale and Box Tree House on Bassetsbury Lane.

Originally **Rosedale** and **Box Tree House** were built in the 1760s as the Parish Workhouse to house the poor or sick.. In 1777 there were 80 to 90 people living there. However, due to the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834 the Chepping Wycombe Poor House was put up for sale in 1837. Lord Carrington bought what was the Master's House, at the end of the former workhouse for £567 and following his death, his son converted it to the fine **Marsh Green House** for his stepmother to live in.

Bear left down Bowden Lane until you see the Back Stream on your right.

The Springs

There are two springs at the end of Bowden Lane – one seeping out of the bank below your feet and one, the other side of the brick railway bridge, bubbling up in the water. These springs show how the ancient well at Holywell Mead would have appeared. Spring water is very pure as it comes directly from an underground reservoir in the chalk which makes it perfect for growing watercress. In the past there were many watercress beds in this area.

The disused railway line from High Wycombe to Maidenhead was built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Now return along Bowden Lane, cross Bassetsbury Lane and walk along the path adjacent to main driveway to the car park. As the road turns left, keep straight onto Holywell Mead, then turn right, following the formal Yew hedge that is the boundary of Bassetsbury Manor.

Cross the driveway of the car park and follow the formal Yew hedge that is the boundary of the manor.

Bassetsbury Manor

Bassetsbury was named after the Basset family who held the manor from 1171. Sir Alan Basset, was advisor to King John, who visited the manor several times during his reign in the early 1200s. The first Manor House was probably built in wood and rebuilt in the late C16th. The present brick Manor House dates to 1688 and so it is possible that the building was damaged during the English Civil War (1642–1651). In 1813, the house was used as a school for 163 boys and then a home to several poor families.



Skulls' Chair Factory, Newland Street c 1875

In the early C20th, Bassetsbury Manor was owned by Fred Skull, a well-known furniture manufacturer in the town and also an antique dealer. The furniture business was taken over by the Ercol furniture factory in 1934.

Much of the hillside to the north of the Rye and London Road was once full of furniture factories. The furniture industry was central to the development of High Wycombe in the C19th. In fact, at this time, supplied with beech wood from the surrounding Chiltern woodlands, Wycombe became the chair-making capital of the World, making nearly 5000 chairs a day!

Continue on the path alongside the boundary of Bassetsbury Manor. You will come to the River Wye as it prepares to enter another mill, Bassetsbury Mill, one of the original mills listed in the Domesday Book. The mill only ever ground corn for flour, until it closed in 1935.

Turn left and follow the riverside path under the trees. When get to the end of this path, where the river bends to the right, look back across to where the Lido is, this area is known as Holywell Mead.

Holywell Mead and its Holy Well

This low-lying area in the middle of the field is the site of the ancient spring or Holy Well that the Mead or meadow was named after and is likely to have been worshipped since prehistoric times. Before it was filled in, in the 1950s it was known as the 'Round Basin' and would have looked very similar to the springs at the end of Bowden Lane with water bubbling up from the underground water or reservoir.

Springs and wells were considered holy sites and were regularly visited by pilgrims at least from Roman and Anglo-Saxon times. In the 1170s, Bishop Hugh of Lincoln visited Wycombe to ban the Pagan worship, linked to wells, as it went against the beliefs of the Christian Church. This is likely to have been one of the wells in question. You can see the pond marked on old maps and you may be able to see how despite the spring being capped in the 1950s, this area still often gets very muddy!

There is a tarmac path that leads back to the Lido and the car park and this marks the old town boundary and the division between the Rye and Holywell Mead.



This is the pond or 'Round Basin' as it was known in the c1930s when it was used for growing watercress.

Copyright Bucks Free Press, SWOP website.

Continue across the Rye towards the children's play area.

The Rye

The river probably flowed through the middle of the Rye at one time in prehistory. Bones of a woolly rhinoceros and a mammoth have been discovered along what would have been early river channels.

The name 'Rye' is possibly from the words 'Eye' or 'Eyot', meaning island in the river and the Rye is in fact almost completely surrounded by water courses. It is ancient common land that the people of Wycombe were allowed to use for grazing cattle up until 1927. In the evening the cattle would be seen walking home, along Easton Street and the High Street to the various dairies. Photo of the High Street, c 1900.



The playground was given to the Rye in 1933 by Mr H J Cox, former mayor. At one time there was a paddling pool, alongside the play area and even a ride-on steam train! An old character of Wycombe that many people still remember fondly was 'Uncle Tom' who had a hut on the playground in the 1930s. He made sure that everyone played together happily.



Wycombe has its very own nursery rhyme – it is best sung on a swing!

A view from the top of the slide on the children's playground showing the paddling pool, late 1930s. Copyright High Wycombe Society, source SWOP website.

Over the Wye and across the Rye

And through the woods and up to the sky

Baby, baby, bye, bye, bye.

Across the Rye and over the Wye,

How does it feel to fly so high?

Baby, baby, bye, bye, bye.

The model railway near the children's playground. April 1952. Copyright Bucks Free Press, source SWOP website.



The Rye hasn't always been so peaceful though. During the English Civil War (1642–1651) the town was caught halfway between the Royalist Oxford and the Parliamentary London and there are records that suggest that the Rye was the site of a battle in 1642. One record says that King Charles sent Lord Wentworth and his royalists to take Wycombe, which at that time was in the hands of the Roundheads or Parliamentarians. It states that 900 royalist men and 300 parliamentarian men were killed in a battle that lasted several hours.



However, we now know that this report is one of several invented accounts, recounting great parliamentary victories against huge but incompetent royalist forces, printed as a pamphlet and circulated in London in the opening months of the war. Lord Wentworth wasn't even in the country at this time. As a result of this 'fake news' many people doubt whether any battle took place in Wycombe at all but in Wycombe Museum there is this artefact, known as a caltrop, one of two metal spikes that were found on the Rye. They were used to throw onto the ground to slow down the horses in a battle, supporting the theory that at least a skirmish took place here at some point during the English Civil War.

East of the River Wye, where the car showroom is today, was once yet another large mill - Rye Mill. It was first used as a corn mill and then in the early C17th as a cloth mill. By 1699 there were two paper mills working on the site making high quality paper for writing, painting, ledgers and bank notes. The chalky water of the streams made it ideal for use in paper-making.

Continue to walk across the Rye towards Pann Mill.

Pann Mill

The River Wye has powered corn mills here for over 1000 years, since at least 1086 when it was listed in the Domesday book, a survey undertaken by William the Conqueror. The Panil family owned the mill from around 1150 and gave it the name. Today's Pann Mill is the result of a restoration project by The High Wycombe Society of the original mill's machinery because the earlier building was demolished in 1971 for a planned new road. Due to campaigning by local people, the Rye was saved from being built on. Marks and Spencer gave funds for the existing building and it is open several times a year when you can see flour being ground.



A view of Pann Mill and Trinity Church with cows grazing freely c 1890. Copyright Bucks Free Press, source SWOP.

The Gallows

At this end of the Rye was where the gallows were, a large wooden frame some 8 metres high where criminals were hung as a death sentence. Crowds of people from all over Wycombe and the surrounding area would come to watch a hanging – it was a day out with loads of stalls and sideshows.

In 1736 when two murderers were hung here, the crowd was so large that part of the Grammar School wall, opposite the Rye was pushed over. And as a lesson to all who passed that way their bodies were left hanging there for 4 years!

The Hospital of St John the Baptist

Across the London Road from Pann Mill are some ruins that date back to 1180, where monks built a house to care for the poor and infirm. The hospital closed when Henry VIII shut the monasteries. In 1562 Queen Elizabeth 1st granted it to the town to be used as a school, naming it the 'Royal Grammar School'. Boys were taught here for 300 years until the Victorian building behind was opened in 1883.

Continue passed the café, along the path known as Wendover Way, towards the closed gates leading into Wycombe Abbey.

Wycombe Abbey

In medieval times the hospital of St Margaret and St Giles was near to Wycombe Abbey, known then as Loakes Manor. When Henry VIII closed the monasteries, this land passed through several owners and then in 1700 became the property of Henry Petty, 1st Earl of Shelburne from Ireland. After his death in 1751, the estate and title passed to his nephew John Fitzmaurice, the 1st British Earl of Shelburne, allowing him to sit in the House of Lords as well as being an MP for Wycombe. John's son William, the 2nd Earl of Shelburne was Prime Minister briefly and agreed the Treaty of Paris, whereby Britain recognised the right of the United States to be an independent nation. He sold the estate to Lord Carrington in 1798.

In 1803 Loakes Manor was redesigned in Gothic style with battlements and turrets and became known as Wycombe Abbey. The Carringtons lived here until 1896 when the Abbey and grounds were sold to become Wycombe Abbey School, with Miss Frances Dove as the headteacher. Miss Dove was among the first women to be elected as a councillor and in 1908 High Wycombe made the national papers as Frances Dove was elected as the first ever female mayor. However, two fellow councillors were persuaded to change their votes and a man called Robert Wood was re-elected instead. In 1942, Wycombe Abbey School was taken over by the US Air Force 8th Army Bomber Command to use as their base in Europe during World War 2. There is a bunker built below the hill and this is where the air raids on Germany were planned. On one day alone, 24 Dec 1944, it dispatched 2034 heavy bombers to hit targets behind enemy lines. It was also in the grounds of Wycombe Abbey that Glen Miller and his band played to the troops.

To finish your trail and return to the car park, follow the wooded path along Wendover Way, behind the Dyke. Alternatively, you can walk from here into town or up Amersham Hill to visit Wycombe Museum.

At the museum you can discover more about the local history and see some of the items found on the Rye. The Museum Shop sells a Children's Colouring and Activity book called High Wycombe Then and Now, written by Frances Alexander.

Bring the completed children's trail with you to receive a free drink with a piece of cake bought from the museum café. Visit <http://wycombemuseum.org.uk/> to check opening times.

Go to Sharing Wycombe's Old Photos <https://swop.org.uk/> to browse many more old photos.

If you have enjoyed this walk, there are many other walks to try in the Chilterns, from chalk streams to hill forts, visit www.chilternsaonb.org

Frances Alexander 6th November 1935 - 7th September 2020

This trail is dedicated to Frances Alexander who provided invaluable input into this trail and remains an inspiration to many people in the town.

Frances Alexander was a very well-known figure in High Wycombe as the town's former mayor, Chairman of the Council, founder of the Environment Centre and president of the Wycombe Liberal Democrats among many other things.

Frances loved history and over many decades investigated and shared the history of High Wycombe. She wrote a book for children on the history of the town: 'High Wycombe, Then and Now', with illustrations for colouring by local artist Lorna Cassidy.

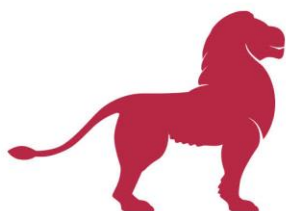
Frances organised a series of stone plaques which today continue to mark the ancient boundary of the Town and she restarted the annual ritual of beating the Town bounds.

In recognition of her decades of dedication to the town she was made an Honorary Burgess of the Town of High Wycombe in 2013 and Bucks New University bestowed an honorary doctorate in 2014 to recognise the work she had done for the environment. And in 2015, Frances was voted a 'Local Legend' along with four other Wycombe 'Legends', resulting in an eco-friendly bus being named after her.



Frances's achievements are far too many to list here. For more information about the town's much loved, inspirational lady go to <https://francesalexander.co.uk/>

Thanks also goes to members of the High Wycombe Society who assisted with this trail www.highwycombesociety.org.uk



**WYCOMBE
MUSEUM**

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