

The people's forest

A self-guided walk around Epping Forest in Essex



Explore an area of tranquil woodlands and grassy plains
Look out for wildlife that thrives in different habitats
Discover a long history of public access to the forest
Find out how the landscape is managed today

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**the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks**







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Cover image: Old pollarded beech tree in Epping Forest, Jynto, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

The people's forest

Explore Epping Forest on the edge of London

Many Londoners looking for some fresh air and a good walk head to the great Royal Parks but the capital's largest open space is actually Epping Forest.



Stretching for 12 miles, this swathe of woodland and grassland is well-loved and well-used by those living on its doorstep. But the forest has a very long history.

This walk explores how the forest has been used and managed during different periods: from peasant villagers cutting wood to monarchs hunting deer and from Victorian picnics to wartime defences. There are stories of legal and illegal activities, of politics and protest, of conflict and consensus.

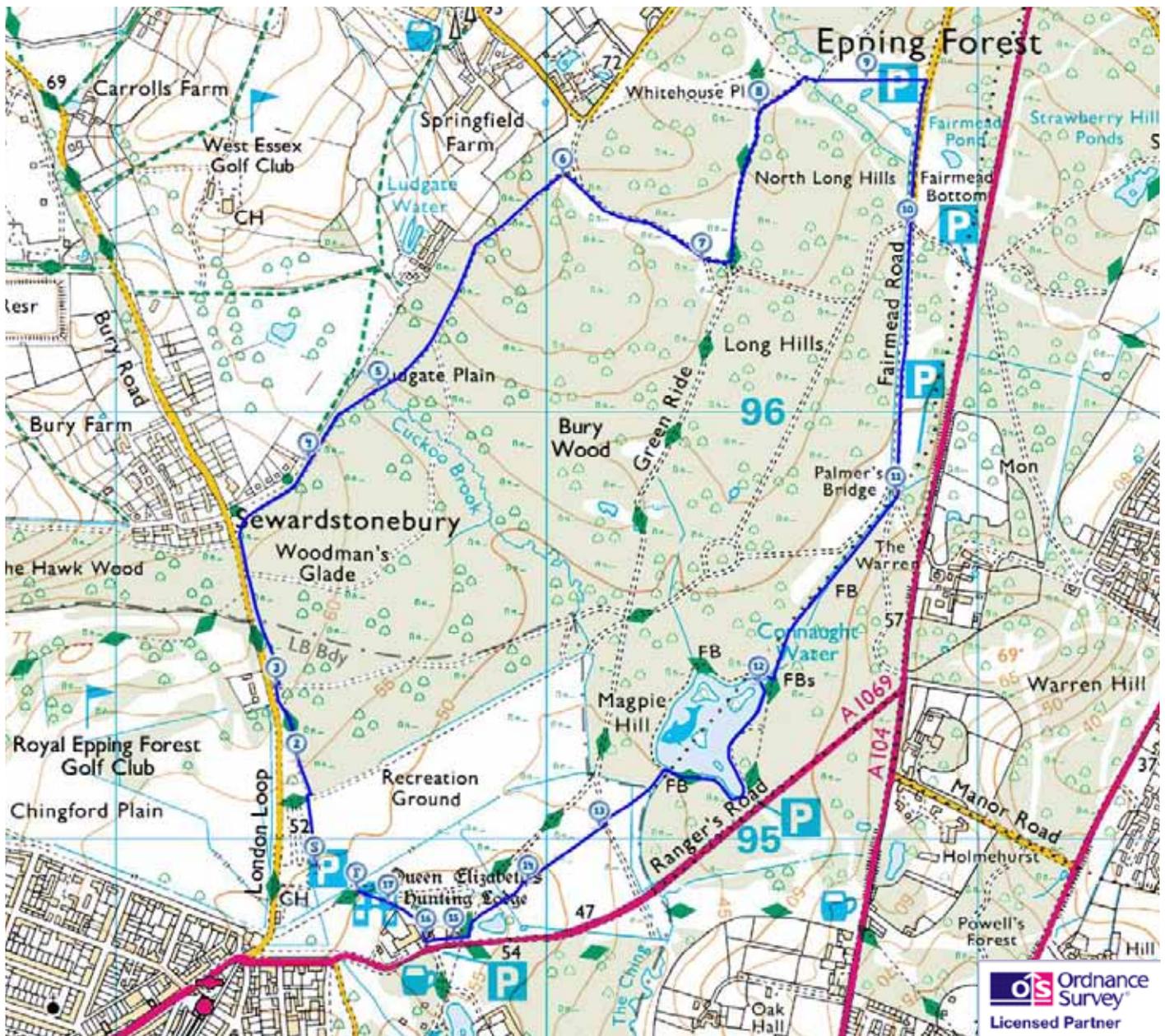


Epping Forest is also a very important site in ecological terms with one of the largest number of ancient pollarded trees in Europe, as well as an abundance of wild flowers and fungi which contributed to its SSSI designation.

Today the challenge is to find a balance between protecting wildlife habitats, conserving historic features and allowing public access.

Path on Chingford Plain (top) and Connaught Water (bottom) © Jenny Lunn

Route map



Stopping points

- | | | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Start | Bury Road car park, Chingford Plain | 10. | Fairmead Road |
| 2. | Bury Wood, near Bury Road | 11. | Palmer's Bridge |
| 3. | Bury Wood, opposite Jubilee Retreat | 12. | Connaught Water |
| 4. | Bury Wood, end of Hornbeam Ave | 13. | Chingford Plain, eastern side |
| 5. | Bury Wood, crossing of Cuckoo Brook | 14. | Chingford Plain, eastern side |
| 6. | Western end of Almshouse Plain | 15. | Butler's Retreat |
| 7. | Eastern end of Almshouse Plain | 16. | Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge |
| 8. | Green Ride by Whitehouse Plain | 17. | Top of Dannet's Hill |
| 9. | Fairmead Bottom | Finish | Bottom of Dannet's Hill |

Practical information

Location	Epping Forest, London Borough of Waltham Forest and Southwest Essex
Start and finish	Bury Road car park, Chingford Plain, Chingford, E4 7AZ
Getting there	<p>Car – Chingford is easily accessible from the A406 (North Circular) and M25 (Junction 26); there is a free car park on Bury Road. It is located just after the Chingford Golf Course club house and its car park.</p> <p>Train – The nearest railway station is Chingford (500 metres) which is served by trains from London Liverpool Street.</p> <p>Bus – The nearest bus station is Chingford (450 metres) which is served by local buses from northeast London and Essex.</p> <p>Underground – The nearest London Underground stations are Buckhurst Hill (2 ½ miles) and Loughton (2 ½ miles) on the Central Line from where you can catch a local bus to Chingford.</p> <p>Bicycle – National Cycle Route 1 passes up the Lee Valley about 1 ½ miles to the west</p>
Directions from rail and bus station to start	Exit the station forecourt or bus station onto Station Road and turn right. After about 100 metres take the second turning on the left which is Bury Road. After about 30 metres (just before the Chingford Golf Course club house) turn right onto the dirt path onto Chingford Plain. After about 100 metres take the narrow path on the left which leads to Bury Road car park. Stop by the information board.
Walk distance	3 ¾ miles
Level	Gentle – An easy walk around the forest with no major hills and easy terrain underfoot.
Terrain	Forest tracks (dirt), grassy paths, tarmac lane, surfaced footpaths.
Conditions	Some of the forest tracks and footpaths can get very muddy after wet weather and during the winter months so walking boots or wellies are recommended.
Best time to visit	The forest has different characteristics depending on the time of year but there is always something to see.
Note on navigation	The walk route uses major tracks and paths but there are very few signposts in the forest so follow the map and directions carefully. The forest is well-known to locals so ask the way if you feel lost.

Suitable for

Families – The forest is a safe environment for children to enjoy (see below for family-friendly activities).

Pushchairs – The entire route could be used by rugged pushchairs when ground conditions are dry.

Dogs – The forest is well used by local dogs but they should be kept under strict control in areas where there are cattle and deer; some of the paths are shared with horses and cyclists.

Refreshments

Butler's Retreat (Stop 15) serves drinks, hot and cold lunches, cakes and ice creams. Open 7 days a week. www.worldslarder.co.uk

The Royal Forest (adjacent to Stop 16) is a Brewers Fayre pub serving hot and cold food. Open 7 days a week. www.brewersfayre.co.uk/pub-restaurant/Greater-London/Royal-Forest-Enfield.html

There are picnic tables by the car park at Connaught Water (between Stop 12 and 13).

There are also lots of cafes and restaurants in Chingford.

Toilets

- Butler's Retreat (Stop 15) – with baby changing facilities
- The View visitor centre (adjacent to Stop 16) – with baby changing facilities
- The Royal Forest (adjacent to Stop 16) – with baby changing facilities

Family friendly activities

Shorter walk option - For little legs that cannot manage the whole distance, try the waymarked 2 ½ mile 'Holly Trail' which starts from Bury Road car park; it follows the main walk route from Stops 1 to 7 and then loops back to Chingford Plain. Download map from <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/about-us/Documents/the-holly-trail-walk-epping-forest.pdf>

Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge (Stop 16) - This spectacular medieval building has child-friendly displays about life in Tudor times and the opportunity to dress-up in costume. Open 7 days a week. Admission free.

The View (adjacent to Stop 16) - The visitor centre has child-friendly interactive displays telling the story of Epping Forest, particularly focused on the ecology and prehistoric sites. Open 7 days a week. Admission free.

Tourist information

The View visitor centre (adjacent to Stop 16)
Visitor information specifically about Epping Forest and a small gift shop.
See above for details

1. Welcome to Epping Forest

Bury Road car park, Chingford Plain

Epping Forest sits on a ridge between the valleys of the River Roding and the River Lee. This ridge runs north eastwards from Manor Park in East London to just north of Epping in Essex.

The forest spans 12 miles and covers around 6,000 acres. Today it is London's largest open space and just over two-thirds of it has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI) in recognition of the age of the forest and its abundance of wildlife.

On this walk we will see different parts of Epping Forest from dense woodlands to open plains and from scenic ponds to historic buildings. We'll take a closer look at the ecology of the forest, not only its trees but also its flowers and fungi, mammals and birds.

We will also discover a cast of human characters who have shaped the forest from kings and lords to commoners and criminals. We'll find out who has owned the land through the centuries and the different ways it has been managed. We will see a shift from the forest used for hunting and grazing to recreation and leisure.



The dark swathe of Epping Forest stands out on a satellite view of northeast London
© Ordnance Survey

The contemporary management of the forest by the Corporation of London evokes a long-standing tradition of common access and use but public rights to the forest have not always been upheld and we will discover some of the controversies and conflicts around access to this natural resource.

This walk was created by Alicia Evans, a geography student at Exeter University, who grew up in Chingford with Epping Forest on her doorstep. "Over the years I've enjoyed many hours in the forest – walking, cycling and horse riding. I love the diversity of people that come together to use the forest. It's a landscape steeped in history and home to a wide range of wildlife which makes it a forest like no other."

Directions 1

With your back to the car park, face towards the open grassland of Chingford Plain. Turn left along the path which is signposted 'The Holly Trail' with the Plain on your right and Bury Road on your left. Where the path meets the trees go straight on into a section of the forest known as Bury Wood. Stop after a short distance once you are surrounded by trees.

2. Seeing the wood from the trees

Bury Wood, near Bury Road

On this walk we will discover that Epping Forest is more than just trees; it contains a variety of different landscapes and habitats. But the predominant characteristic is woodland and thus it's only right that we begin our exploration by finding out more about the trees that grow here.

There has been some form of woodland here since temperate vegetation colonised the area after the last Ice Age. Since then there have been changes in the dominant types of trees found here but the forest landscape that you see today is largely a result of the last millennia and thus classified as 'ancient woodland'.



Path through Bury Wood
© Jenny Lunn

The three main dominant native trees in Epping Forest are oak, beech and hornbeam. Obviously the look and feel of the forest will vary depending on the time of year that you visit, but do try to learn how to distinguish different types of tree.



Oak is easy to recognise by its bark which is rugged and deeply fissured in older trees. The leaves have characteristic rounded lobes and the fruit are acorns which begin green and turn brown before falling in the autumn.



Oak bark and hornbeam leaves
© Jenny Lunn

The bark of beech is smooth and grey, often with slight horizontal etchings. The leaves are oval and pointed at the tip with a wavy edge. Look out for catkins in spring after the new leaf buds appear and small nuts (known as beech mast), the husks of which carpet the forest floor in autumn.

Hornbeam also has a grey-coloured bark and leaves similar to the beech only a little smaller and more furrowed. Look out for green catkins in spring which develop into clusters and winged fruits known as samara which turn from green to brown before falling.

Plenty of other species are found in the forest too including birch, ash, crab apple and sycamore.

In this southern part of Epping Forest oak and holly are dominant because they prefer the clay soils found here. In the northern parts of the forest beech tends to dominate, a species more suited to the drier and better drained soils there.



Learn to recognise different species (clockwise from top left): acorn, beech mast, hornbeam catkins, sycamore leaf, crab apples, holly berries
LoggaWiggler, Pixabay (CCL) / Walter Baxter, Geograph (CCL) / David Hawgood, Geograph (CCL) / Gary Knight, Flickr (CCL) / Wehha, Wikimedia Commons (CCL) / Jack Berry, Flickr (CCL)

Directions 2

Follow the path through Bury Wood. At the first major junction of paths, there is a gate on the left leading out onto Bury Road. Across the road is a complex of buildings called Jubilee Retreat. Look above it at what appears to be a large conifer tree. This is actually a mobile phone mast disguised as a tree!



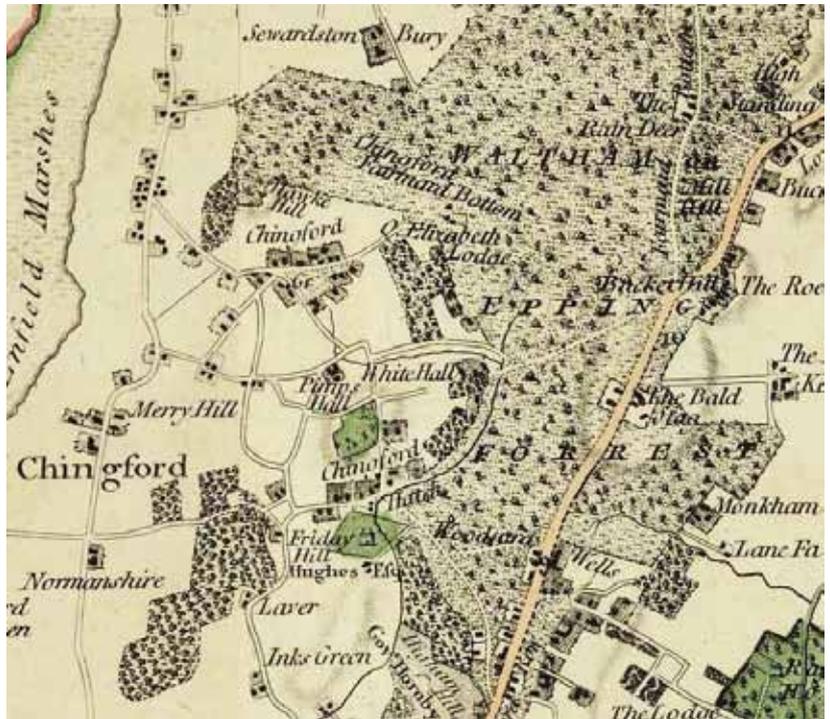
3. Pasture, Pannage and Wood

Bury Wood, opposite Jubilee Retreat

Today Chingford is a residential suburb of northeast London but centuries ago it was far outside the city, remote and isolated. It was one of a number of villages on the fringes of the forest.

In the Domesday Book of 1086 it is recorded as having a population of eight villagers, six smallholders and four slaves. They also had two cobs (a type of horse), nine cattle, 27 pigs and 100 sheep.

While the forest was owned by the king and various local lords, under Forest Law local inhabitants had the 'rights of Common' which was the freedom to use particular areas of land and exploit their natural resources.



Map of Chingford and other forest villages (1786)
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society



Commoners exercising their right to Wood
Courtesy of the Friends of Epping Forest

The three most highly-valued rights for medieval peasants were:

- Pasture – the right to graze certain animals
- Pannage – the right to turn out pigs in autumn to eat acorns, beech mast and other nuts
- Wood – the right to regularly cut wood to use as fuel or to make fences and hurdles

The peasants (or 'Commoners') who lived around Epping Forest vigorously defended these rights.

At this junction of paths, stand with your back to the road. Notice the dense woodland to the right of the path ahead and more sparse woodland to the left.

This offers a snapshot of the different areas of the forest and how they might have been used for Pasture, Pannage and Wood.



'Harvesting acorn to feed swine'
Detail of a miniature from the Queen Mary Psalter (1310-1320)
British Library (CCL)



A carpet of acorns - ideal fodder for pigs
James DeMers, Pixabay (CCL)



Pannage is still practiced in the New Forest
Jim Champion, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Directions 3

Continue along the path through Bury Wood with Bury Road on your left. Ignore any minor paths to the left or right. After about 350 metres, you will see a road sign indicating the village of Sewardstonebury. Here the path bears right away from the Bury Road. To the left of the path are the houses of Hornbeam Avenue. After the last of the houses on the left you can see a golf course. Stop here and look at the area of trees on the right.

4. Lopping

Bury Wood, level with end of Hornbeam Avenue

At the last stop we found out about the various rights of Common including the right of Wood. Harvesting wood at regular intervals was known as 'lopping', a word still in use today.

Lopping specifically means cutting off a branch, limb or twig from the main body of a tree rather than cutting down the whole tree from the base of the trunk. This is a sustainable way of managing the forest as the trees rejuvenate over time ready to be harvested again providing a constant supply of wood.

There are two main methods of lopping wood – pollarding and coppicing – and the legacy of this ancient forest management practice is still very visible in the trunk shapes of the trees today.

For example, look at the trees to the right of the path and you can see that some have an unusual shape: the main tree trunk rises from the ground and then at about head-height, the branches grow from a cluster. This is a sign of pollarding.



Pollarded oak tree
© Jenny Lunn

The upper branches of the tree were cut off about six to eight feet off the ground every twelve to eighteen years. This method encouraged the tree to regularly grow new shoots. Furthermore, these new shoots were safe out of reach of grazing cattle and deer.

In the case of coppicing the tree was cut much closer to the ground leaving a low stump or 'stool'. These were re-cut regularly after only a few years. However, new shoots on such trees were at a low level thus accessible by grazing animals, hence coppicing tended to occur more in privately-owned woodland which was surrounded by fences to prevent access by cattle and deer. Forest Court records from the 1600s note complaints about a failure to fence an area after coppicing, so some animals obviously helped themselves to the new growth.

Directions 4

Continue along the path. After about 250 metres the path reaches its lowest point and crosses a small stream called Cuckoo Brook. Stop here and look at the area of trees to the right of the path.

5. Death brings life

Bury Wood, crossing of Cuckoo Brook

Coppicing largely stopped in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but it seems that many formerly coppiced trees were subsequently pollarded.

Pollarding continued into the mid-nineteenth century but when it ceased the trees continued to grow; that accounts for the scar tissue and mature growth that you now see on many pollarded stumps.

However, this means that around 50,000 trees across the forest are now reaching old-age together.

Unfortunately the cessation of pollarding means that many of the trees have become weak at their 'crown', the height at which they were once cut. Some crowns split and part of the tree falls; some whole trees become top heavy and topple over. They are also susceptible to wind damage.



Collapse of some old pollarded trees
Rwendland, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)



Moss growing on dead wood
© Jenny Lunn

Look around this area, particularly to the right of the path, for dead and decaying trees. In the summer and spring months they stand out much more starkly against the greenery than in the winter months. But the death of a tree is not the end of its useful life. Here in Epping Forest, unless they present a danger, dead trees are left in situ.

A standing dead tree can provide nesting holes for birds and bats, while insects find a home in loose bark and in rotting trunks. A fallen tree lying on the forest floor will slowly break up but it may become host to lichen, mosses or fungi and provide shelter and food for small mammals and insects.

Directions 5

Continue along the path. At the first major junction of paths continue straight on, climbing very steadily up a hill and down the other side. At the bottom of the hill is a clearing to the right which is the beginning of Almshouse Plain, named after some almshouses for the poor that were located nearby in the early-nineteenth century. Stop at the junction of paths.

6. Flowers and fungi

Western end of Almshouse Plain

As mentioned earlier, Epping Forest does not solely consist of woodland and this clearing is one example of the many open grassy areas.

If you are here during the spring and summer months you will see an abundance of wildflowers. These differ from the wildflowers found in the wooded areas where the soil and light conditions are different.



Red campion (left) and common knapweed (right)
Eyelyn Simak, Geograph (CCL) / Jonathan Kington, Geograph (CCL)

In total, Epping Forest boasts over 650 species of plant including wildflowers, ferns, mosses and orchids. In this clearing look out for devil's-bit scabious, knapweed, spiny restharrow and birds-foot trefoil; in the woodland areas look out for bluebells, red campion and wood anemones.



Ganoderma resinaceum tree fungus
Chmee2, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

There are also over 1,600 species of fungi. In fact, Epping Forest has one of the longest and unbroken records of fungi anywhere in the world. Fungi are often overlooked but are actually incredibly important in supporting the growth of the trees, shrubs and plants. They also play a role in the lifecycle of many insects and invertebrates.

A number of rather rare fungi can be found here including the zoned rosette and the oak polypore but don't be tempted to pick any because fungi picking is not permitted!

The flora and fungi of the forest are a major reason for Epping Forest being declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation.

Directions 6

At the junction, turn right with the clearing of Almshouse Plain on your right. Stop after about 400 metres where the path forks.

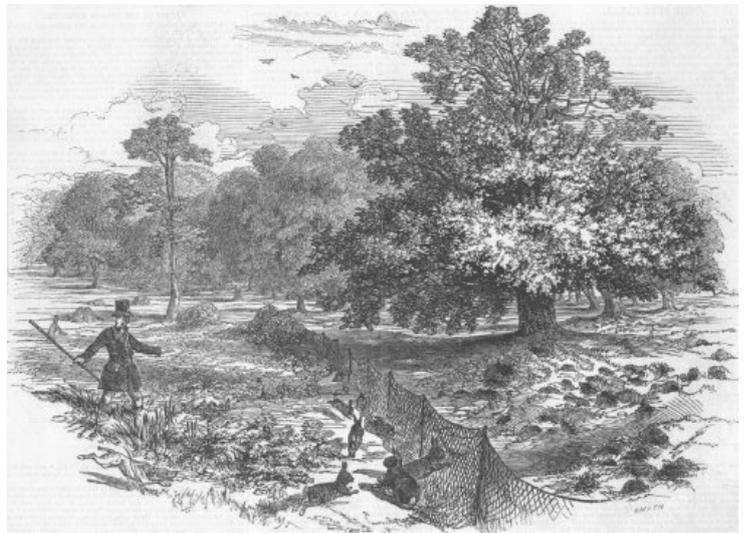
7. Watership Down

Eastern end of Almshouse Plain

Here on Almshouse Plain you may see one of the mammals that makes its home in Epping Forest: rabbits.

Rabbits were once incredibly numerous and an important part of the forest ecosystem. They were also caught for food, but not by the peasant villagers. Under Forest Law, rabbits were the property of the landowner (the king or the lord of the manor) and Commoners had no right to hunt them.

In later times, rabbits were deliberately farmed. Just nearby is The Warren, one of the forest lodges. At one time it had an extensive rabbit warren around. During the 1700s the building was used as an inn and it is no surprise that it was famous for serving rabbit pie!



Rabbit netting in Epping Forest
From the Illustrated London News (1850)
Courtesy of The Friends of Epping Forest

The situation changed in the 1950s with an outbreak of Myxomatosis in the UK. Myxomatosis causes blindness and eventually pneumonia in rabbits, leading to their death. Farmers initially welcomed the disease because it eliminated these animals that had become an agricultural pest, but it soon became an ecological disaster. At its peak in 1955 Myxomatosis killed 95 per cent of rabbits in the UK.

Almshouse Plain was one of the areas in Epping Forest that was most noticeably affected. With fewer and fewer rabbits grazing, the grasslands and plains began to be invaded by seedling trees, brambles and shrubs. Through the 1960s and 1970s the clearings and plains began to disappear as infant woodland started to establish. You can see that quite clearly at this end of Almshouse Plain where young trees and bushes have colonised the open space.

Today rabbits have started returning to the forest naturally, although in smaller numbers than those seen before the 1950s.

Directions 7

At the fork in the path, go left. At the next junction turn left along a major track which is known as the Green Ride. Follow this path for about 350 metres until you see a grassy path off to the left into a clearing known as Whitehouse Plain. This is indicated by a white pole.

8. Going for a ride

Green Ride by turning into Whitehouse Plain

The track that we have been following is known as the Green Ride and sometimes called Victoria's Ride. It is a path that goes the full length of the forest from Chingford Plain to Epping.

It was created in 1882 for Queen Victoria's visit (more on that later) so that she could drive the length of the forest if she wished.

This is one of a number of named 'rides' in the forest. These were originally grassy but in the 1960s a lot of damage was being caused to the forest floor by horse riding. The local newspaper was full of letters of complaint! The solution was a network of surfaced rides which made use of gravel from houses demolished during the rebuilding of East London.

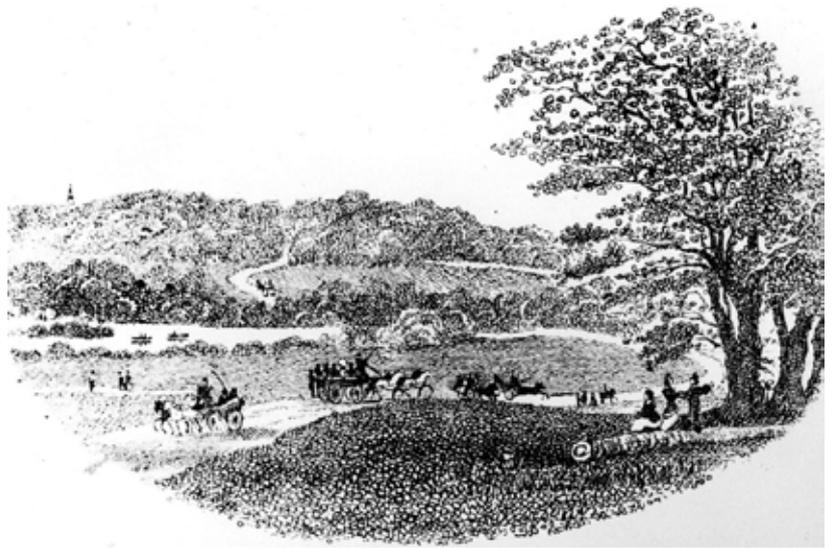


Illustration entitled 'The road between High Beech and Chingford
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society

Today there are over 30 miles of surfaced tracks which remain open throughout the year. There is also a wide network of unsurfaced paths but these are sometimes temporarily closed to horse riders to avoid multiple hooves causing soil erosion. The grassy path onto Whitehouse Plain here, indicated by a white post, is an example of a ride which may periodically be closed to riders.

Riding in the forest is very popular but horse riders have to abide by the Epping Forest Byelaws which include the requirement to carry a valid licence disc attached to the left hand side of the horse's bridle. Failure to display it could result in prosecution!

There are a number of horse riding clubs and schools as well as the Epping Forest Riders Association which fights to ensure the maintenance of bridleways. However, it is important to point out that horse riders are just one of the users of the forest – cyclists and walkers have equal rights to use the trails – and there have been cases of conflict between different user groups.

Directions 8

Continue along the main track (Green Ride) which soon bears round to the right (with more grassy paths off to the left) and then to the left. At the left bend turn right off the main track. Go past the wooden post and onto an open area known as Fairmead Bottom. Follow the wide grassy path and stop part way across.

9. Oh deer!

Fairmead Bottom

Earlier we found out about the rights of Commoners but they weren't the only people with an interest in the forest and its resources.

Records show that Epping Forest was known as 'the King's Woods' as far back as the seventh century. The primary interest of successive royals was hunting game both for sport and food.

Under medieval Forest Law, the rights of Vert and Venison allowed the protection of game animals (particularly deer and wild boar) and the vegetation that these animals used for grazing and shelter known as 'special vert' (particularly crab apple, hawthorn, blackthorn and holly).



Deer hunting in a medieval forest
from *Le Livre de chasse* de Gaston Phébus (1387-89) (CCL)

This large open plain is part of what is known as Fairmead Bottom. It was once part of a deer park called Fair Mead Park which Henry VIII created in 1543, although it had probably been used for hunting in earlier times.

Although the king was the only person with the right to hunt deer, locals hunted too. There is a row of cottages in nearby Loughton which was known as Mutton Row. 'Black mutton' was the code name for venison and these cottages were reputed to have secret cellars to hide venison illegally poached from the forest!



One of the cartoons of *The Epping Hunt* by Thomas Hood
Courtesy of the Friends of Epping Forest

By the eighteenth century the annual Epping Hunt held on Easter Monday was an occasion for aristocrats from London to try their hand at the ancient sport. However, being held on a public holiday, this event began to attract middle and lower classes from London whose participation was widely satirised, most notably in 'The Epping Hunt', a comic poem by Thomas Hood.

Later, we will discover more about the royals and their hunting, as well as one particular deer stealing gang, but for now we can find out a little more about the resident deer population.

In earlier times, roe deer and red deer were found in the forest but now the two types to be found are black fallow deer and muntjac deer.

Fallow deer are mostly found in the north, both in the forest and the surrounding countryside. They tend to stay in herds but are shy and difficult to spot. Due to the number of fatalities on the forest roads, a deer sanctuary was established in 1959 near the village of Theydon Bois where a herd of over one hundred live in an enclosed area of woodland and grassland.



Fallow deer in the sanctuary
© Ken Hoy



Muntjac deer
Ajay Tegala, Geograph (CCL)

Meanwhile, Muntjac deer are widespread throughout the forest, particularly in the thicker woodland. The species is actually from Southeast Asia and the populations now found across southern England derive from some that escaped from Woburn Abbey in the 1920s. Muntjac are about the size of Labrador dogs with a characteristic rounded back and brown coat. They lead solitary lives but are less shy of humans so you are more likely to see some.

Deer numbers in the forest are monitored annually and a number of 'deer glades' have been established to provide safe feeding areas. However, fatalities still occur on the forest roads which are heavily used by fast-moving traffic.

Directions 9

Continue on the grassy path across Fairmead Bottom until you reach a car park. Go through the car park and onto the lane, which is called Fairmead Road. Turn right onto the road. Stop after about 300 metres where a track goes into the forest on the right and across the plain on the left.

10. Highways and byways

Fairmead Road

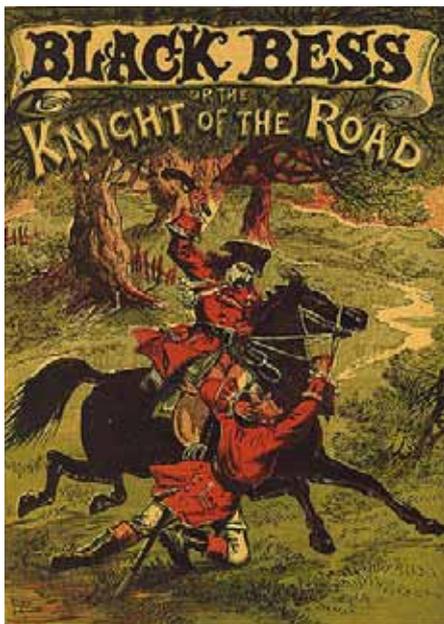
This is Fairmead Road, one of many roads and lanes through the forest, many of which are ancient routes.

Some are ridgeways dating back to the Neolithic period (4,000 to 5,000 years ago); others are from the medieval period when they would have been busy thoroughfares.

There were 'droving roads' for moving livestock between pastures or to market and there was a network of local paths enabling people to travel between villages. There were also sections of much longer routeways such as the coaching roads that ran between London and East Anglia.



London to Chelmsford passenger coach
Courtesy of the Friends of Epping Forest

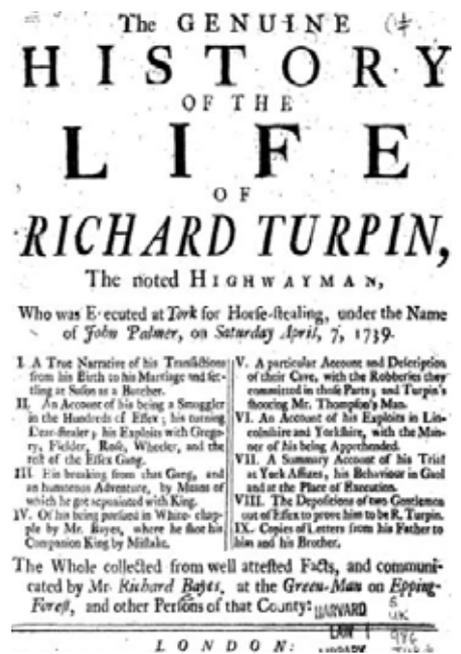


The story of Dick Turpin dramatised in one of the 'penny dreadful' magazines (1866-68)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

However, it wasn't always safe for traffic using the forest roads. The notorious highwayman, Dick Turpin, frequented Epping Forest.

Having been apprenticed as a butcher in East London, he started his own butchery in the nearby village of Buckhurst Hill in 1731.

In the following years there were complaints from the Forest Keepers about armed men stealing deer. Turpin was an associate and probably provided an outlet for their venison through his shop.



First page of 'The Genuine History of the Life of Richard Turpin The noted Highwayman' by Richard Bayes (1739)
Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

Turpin later joined one of the deer stealing gangs but soon moved on to the more lucrative crime of robbing from travellers on the roads out of London. Newspaper reports show that he was certainly operating as a highwayman in Epping Forest in 1735 and 1737. There is a site in the forest known as Turpin's Cave which is reputedly where he lived with his wife and horses.

Over the last hundred years some of the old tracks through the forest have been surfaced for use by modern road vehicles while others have remained 'green lanes' used only by walkers, horse riders and cyclists.

The busy road that you can hear from here is Epping New Road which was deliberately constructed in the 1830s to bypass the hilly road through Buckhurst Hill and Loughton which was difficult for horse-drawn coaches.



Forest paths and roads (clockwise from top left): Fairmead Road, path between Warren Hill and Manor Road, the road to Upshire, the Green Ride

© Jenny Lunn / Stephen Craven, Geograph (CCL) / Lynda Poulter, Geograph (CCL) / © Jenny Lunn

Directions 10

Continue along Fairmead Road which is very straight. If you prefer there is a grassy path running parallel to the left. After about 600 metres the lane ends and paths radiate in different directions. At this junction there is a bridge over a small stream; you can see some brickwork of the bridge either side of the path.

11. The Commoners and the Corporation

Palmer's Bridge

This small bridge which crosses a brook is called Palmer's Bridge after Lieutenant Colonel George Palmer of Nazeing Park (1799-1883). Palmer was one of four Verderers, representatives of the Crown who upheld the monarch's rights of Forest and administered justice under Forest Law.

However, the expansion of London from the early 1800s brought about a new era for Epping Forest. Land here, within reach of the city, started to increase in value and the rights of Common were under threat from the 'enclosure' – effectively the privatisation – of land.

At this time, the Crown had less interest in hunting game and did not want the expenditure of maintaining the forest so they decided to sell off their rights to the lords of the manors. These lords then put fences around the land that they now owned, enclosing it.

However, in what today would be exposed as a 'conflict of interest', three of the four Verderers were also lords of a manor: their role as Verderers was to uphold the rights of Common yet as lords of the manor they were enclosing the forest and denying these rights.

Commoners of the forest villages began to protest; they wanted to protect their rights of Pasture, Pannage and Wood. Some of the lords intimidated people and threatened them with prosecution if they exercised their lopping rights. Palmer, however, opposed enclosures and supported the Commoners in the protests. For two decades he campaigned, appealing for support from Parliament, the Lord Mayor, the City of London and even Queen Victoria herself.

The Corporation of the City of London was persuaded to intervene in the legal battle against the lords of all the Forest Manors. A ruling in 1874 declared that the lords owned the 'soil' of the forest but the common rights of usage were equal. The enclosures were declared illegal but by this stage more than half of today's Epping Forest was illegally enclosed and some of it had been sold off for development.

This changed in 1878 when the Corporation bought out the rights of the lords of the manors and those still vested with the Crown. They also compensated the Commoners for their loss of common rights. And in 1880 this rather unassuming bridge was named Palmer's Bridge in recognition of the man's efforts to seek justice for the people and their forest.

Directions 11

Cross Palmer's Bridge and immediately afterwards fork right on a path. This path runs in a very straight line and is known as Red Path (because it was originally made with crushed red brick rubble). After about 500 metres Red Path meets a bend in another path, turn right then immediately left onto the wooden boardwalk over a pond called Connaught Water.

12. Pits and ponds

Connaught Water

This is Connaught Water, one of over a hundred ponds in Epping Forest. However, you may be surprised to discover that most of these bodies of water are manmade. There are four broad types.

First, one of the rights under Forest Law was the right to dig gravel. From the seventeenth century this gravel was used to repair and maintain parish roads.

This official practice, along with illegal gravel digging, is responsible for many of the small pits found around Epping Forest that are now filled with water.



Connaught Water
© Jenny Lunn

Second, parts of the forest were quite marshy. In order to improve this land for grazing cattle and for better access to the forest, it was drained. This was done by creating drainage ditches that fed into ponds. Connaught Water began its life as one such drainage pond.



Skiffs for hire on Connaught Water (1920)
Courtesy of The Friends of Epping Forest

Connaught Water is now a third type of pond in the forest: a recreational resource. In 1883 the drainage pond was turned into a nine-acre ornamental lake and, a decade later, enlarged and the islands in the middle created.

As it is not deep, it was initially used as a paddling pond but a concession was soon granted to provide rowing boats for hire, a tradition that continued until the 1970s. In winter when the water froze it was popular for ice skating. Now it attracts families who come to walk and feed the ducks.

The fourth type of pond in the forest is craters created by bombs and rockets during the Second World War that have subsequently filled with water.

All the water bodies in the forest boast rich aquatic life. Here on Connaught Water look out for mute swans, great crested grebes, mallards, coots, moorhens and mandarin ducks. There is also a wealth of insects if you look a little closer.

Angling is permitted at about a quarter of the ponds in Epping Forest if you have a Rod Licence. Connaught Water contains a variety of freshwater fish including carp, perch, gudgeon, pike, rudd, roach and tench, along with the occasional eel.



Swan on Connaught Water
© Alicia Evans



Forest ponds: Warren Pond (left) and Blackweir Pond (right)
Northmetpit, Wikimedia Commons (CCL) / Stephen Craven, Geograph (CCL)

Directions 12

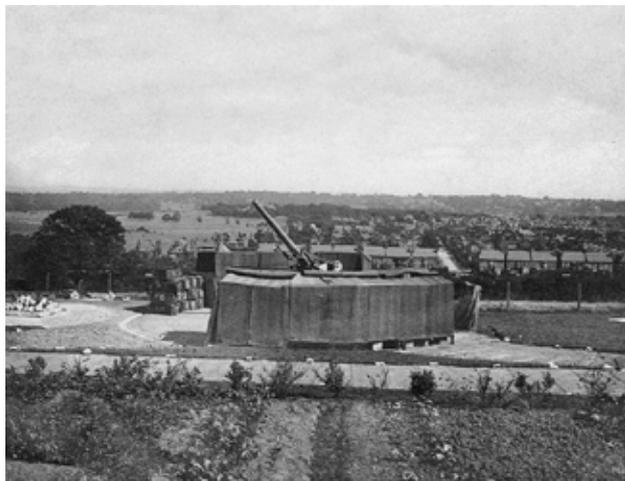
Follow the boardwalk to the other end and then continue along the path ahead with the water on your right. At the car park continue following the lakeside path. About 200 metres after the car park you will see a metal drainage grill where a stream, the Ching Brook, flows out from the lake. Turn left on the path away from the lake with the stream on your left. When you reach a major junction of paths go straight ahead on the grassy path signposted 'To Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge'. Stop after about 50 metres where the grass path goes over a series of ridges.

13. Ploughing the Plain

Chingford Plain, eastern side

This open area is part of Chingford Plain. Have you noticed the ridges in the ground on this path which make for some unorthodox walking? These are the result of ploughing. Chingford Plain was enclosed by the mid-nineteenth century, the grassland ploughed up and used to grow crops.

The Plain was put to quite different use during the Second World War. In 1940 deep trenches and ridges were created across the Plain to deter German gliders from landing. In the northeast corner there was a dump for unexploded bombs and in the western section there was an anti-aircraft battery that later became an Italian prisoner of war camp.



Anti-aircraft gun on Pole Hill above Chingford Plain
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society

After its wartime use the Plain was once again returned to the people. A steam roller was used to try to flatten out some of the ploughing ridges to create football pitches. These pitches were discontinued in the 1980s and most of the grassland left to nature apart from a section which is mown to allow people to fly radio-controlled model planes.

Also look up above for a variety of birds. The open grassland of Chingford Plain attracts skylarks who nest here, kestrels who hunt small mammals such as field voles and green woodpeckers who feed on yellow ants.



Left to right: skylark, common kestrel, green woodpecker
Diliff / Artemy Voikhansky / Christine Matthews (all CCL)

Directions 13

Continue along the wide grassy path which leads gently uphill. Stop where the path forks near the top of the hill.

14. Cattle at work

Chingford Plain, eastern side

You may have seen various signs announcing 'Cattle at work' and 'Beware cattle' although you may not have actually seen any as they are only brought to the forest in the summer months and they move around.

Under Forest Law, Commoners could graze their domesticated livestock (cattle, horses, mules and ponies) in the forest under the right to Pasture. Animals belonging to such Commoners were branded with a mark indicating the parish to which they belonged. The Reeve, a man appointed to oversee that the rules were followed, could impound any animals found in the forest without a parish brand.



English Longhorn
© Jenny Lunn

After the Corporation took responsibility for the forest in 1878, all Commoners' rights ceased apart from the right to Pasture which continued for another century. But several factors brought about the end of grazing in the forest in the twentieth century. First cattle were at risk from the increased traffic on the forest roads, despite legally having rights over motorists. Second there were public complaints about damage to gardens. Third the outbreak of BSE (commonly known as mad cow disease) in 1996 saw strict regulations imposed on cattle owners.



Cattle grazing on Chingford Plain
© Jenny Lunn

Fortunately this situation did not persist and cattle were reintroduced in 2002. It has been recognised that grazing by small herds is an effective means of forest management. The cattle munch their way through grass and shrubs, gently controlling the growth of vegetation in a less intrusive way than by using machinery.

For example, birdsfoot trefoil is a low-growing species of flower that thrives when hooves create bare ground and its dead grass stems are removed.

If you are visiting during summer, look out for two distinct herds of cattle: English Longhorn and Red Poll. Both are gentle in nature but electric fencing is sometimes used to control the area in which they are grazing.

Directions 14

Take the left fork and follow the path through trees towards a building. When you reach the building turn left to go round to the front which faces the road.

15. Time for tea

Butler's Retreat

Chingford was a quiet and isolated parish lacking public transport until the railway line from central London was extended here in 1873.

Originally the terminus was at the village green but it was extended half a mile to its current position on the edge of the town in 1878.

This made the grandiose new station much less convenient for most of the village's residents but that was not the primary concern. There were plans to extend the line further to High Beech in the centre of Epping Forest.

The new Chingford station was built as a through station with platforms and tracks leading out onto an embankment ready to cross the newly-named Station Road and enter the forest. This was going to attract great volumes of tourists and stimulate suburban growth in the surrounding area.



The original station at Chingford Green (top) and the new Chingford Station (bottom)
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society



The triumphal arch built at Chingford Station to welcome the Queen in 1882
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society

The following decades saw thousands of day-trippers come both by train and bus. They came to enjoy walks in the forest, picnics on the plain and boating on Connaught Water.

Fortunately this coincided with the Epping Forest Act of 1878. The Corporation took over the forest and saved it from development. And when Queen Victoria came in 1882 to officially declare the forest open to the public, she came to Chingford by train.



Bus service from Chingford station to High Beech (1905)
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society

To cater for these day-trippers, a number of enterprises were set up around Epping Forest to provide refreshments. Many of these 'Retreats' were associated with the Temperance Movement which urged moderation or abstinence in the consumption of alcohol.

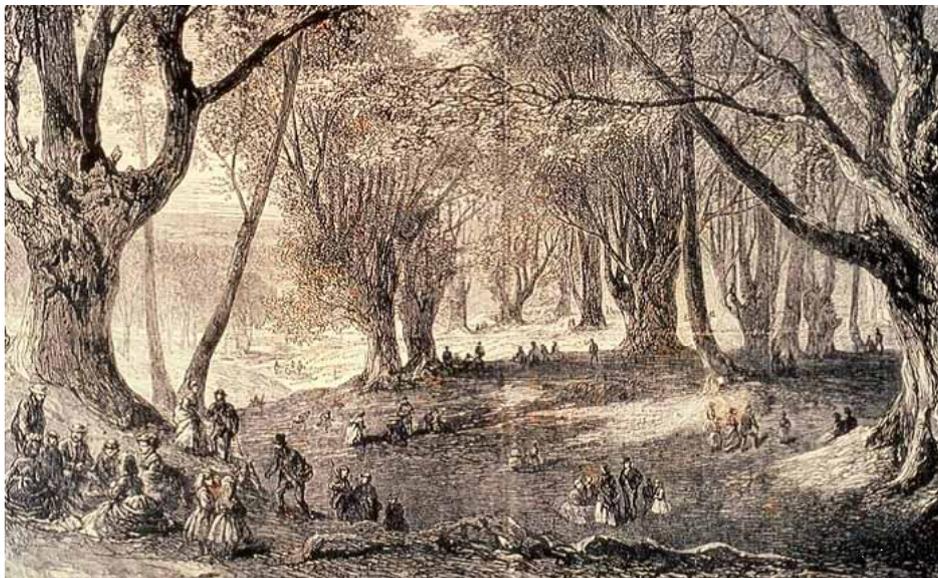
Butler's Retreat here, which is named after John Butler who began providing refreshments here in 1891, is one of the few of Epping Forest's retreats that survives today.



Butler's Retreat
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society

And it continues in the tradition of providing refreshments to visitors. Thanks to Heritage Lottery Funding the building has been restored and there is a new café inside which is highly recommended for tea and cakes. The end of the walk is just a short distance away, so you may prefer to finish the walk and then come back for refreshments.

The groundwork for the railway's extension into the forest was eventually removed to make way for the bus station. Nowadays the railway line from Chingford transports commuters into the city rather than helping the masses to escape it!



Victorian scene of picnicking in Epping Forest (1860-70s)
Courtesy of The Friends of Epping Forest

Directions 15

Follow the surfaced path across the front of Butler's Retreat with the road on your left. Stop at the next building which has a distinctive red brick chimney.

16. Grandstand view

Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge

Earlier we found out about the deer park created by King Henry VIII for hunting. In 1543 he built a hunting lodge here called The Greate Standing – meaning grandstand.

From here he had an excellent view of the hunt across the plain and into the forest. The upper storeys would have been open to watch the hunt while colourful banners and flags would have been draped around the building.

In 1589 Queen Elizabeth I ordered major repairs and it is now known as Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge although there is actually no historical evidence that she ever came.



Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge
© Jenny Lunn



View across Chingford Plain
from Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge
© Jenny Lunn

The Corporation acquired the lodge under the Epping Forest Act of 1878 and became a popular place for Londoners to visit after the coming of the railway.

By this time the building had suffered a number of Victorian alterations and 'improvements' and it wasn't until 1993 that it was restored to the more authentic Tudor appearance that you see today.

Do go inside (it's free) and up to the top floor to survey the view over Chingford Plain as Henry VIII would once have done. There's also more information about the history of the building and displays about life in Tudor times.

Directions 16

After going inside the Hunting Lodge, do go next door to The View visitor centre where there are displays about the ecology and history of Epping Forest, as well as a small gift shop. When you are ready, go through the gate that leads from the lawn of the Hunting Lodge out onto the hill overlooking Chingford Plain, known as Dannet's Hill. Bear left on the path which leads down across the grass towards some trees. You will see the bottom of the car park of the Royal Forest on the left. Go between two large oak trees and stop just beyond, looking down onto Chingford Plain.

17. Protection and promotion

Top of Dannet's Hill

With your back to the hill, look left across the Plain and you will see a line of houses on the other side of Ranger's Road. This strict demarcation between the town of Chingford and Epping Forest is a testimony to the Corporation's commitment to preserving the forest from development.

When the Corporation took responsibility for the forest in 1878 their aim was to keep the forest looking 'natural'. After some initial clearance of thickets and scrub, little was done for many decades. Now there is some strategic management, for example through selective pollarding and grazing cattle.



Looking across Chingford Plain to Rangers Road
© Jenny Lunn



Pollarded beech trees
ProfDEH, Wikimedia Commons (CCL)

This makes the forest a rare example of a 'continuous woodland' where the vegetation has developed over thousands of years with little human interference.

Its ecological importance was recognised in 1953 with designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and subsequently as a Special Area of Conservation under the European Habitats Directive.

Since 1878 the Corporation has actually increased the size of Epping Forest through the purchase, gift and exchange of land. Further areas adjoining the forest have also been acquired as buffer land to protect the rural environment and its wildlife.

Epping Forest is very special due to the combination of the traditional use of the forest for so many centuries under the rights of Common followed by its strict protection by the Corporation.



Special fungi and wildflowers: two reasons for SSSI status
John Myers / Mike Pennington, Geograph (CCL)

However, the Epping Forest Act of 1878 stipulated that the forest should be managed as an open space for public recreation and enjoyment. So the Corporation has an ongoing challenge of protecting an ancient landscape while allowing for twenty-first century leisure activities. Beetles, mushrooms and trees have as much right to the forest as dog walkers, horse riders and cyclists!

The best interests of the forest and its varied users are also promoted by The Friends of Epping Forest. This organisation liaises between the forest users and the Corporation, local councils, government departments and other public bodies to protect and promote the forest. For example, they represent the interest of the forest on bodies such as the London Green Belt Council and The Council for the Protection of Rural Essex.



The challenge of balancing the needs of different user groups including horse riders, walkers and cyclists
Andrew Dann, Geograph (CCL) / © Jenny Lunn

Directions 17

Follow the path down Dannet's Hill. Stop at the bottom where there is a junction of paths.

18. The people's forest

Bottom of Dannet's Hill

In 1882 Queen Victoria planted a tree in front of the King's Oak public house at High Beech and dedicated the forest as an open space 'for the enjoyment of the people for ever'. Over 100 years later, you have benefitted from this commitment to preserving Epping Forest as the people's forest.

On this walk we have explored different sections of the forest each with their particular characteristics. We have observed the variety of vegetation and wildlife – from beech to beetles, deer to ducks, and flowers to fungi.

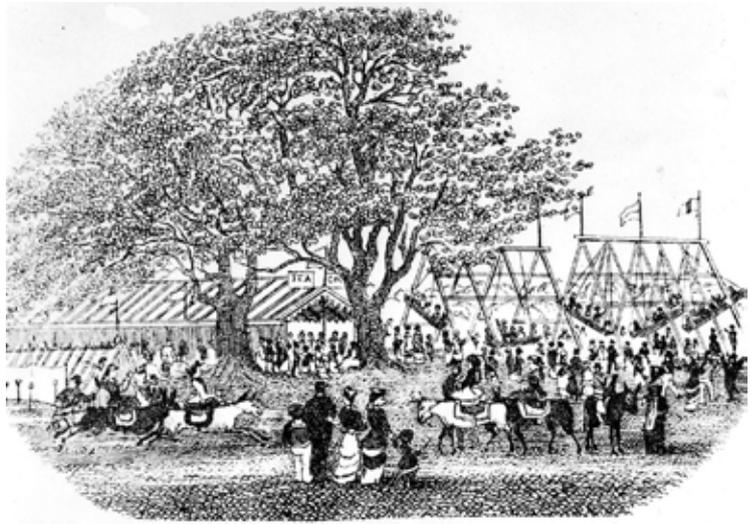


Illustration entitled 'Holiday time in the forest'
Courtesy of Chingford Historical Society



The four current Verderers of Epping Forest
Left to right: Richard Morris OBE, Peter Adams,
Dr Jo Thomas, Michael Chapman DL
Courtesy of The Friends of Epping Forest

We have discovered how people have made use of the natural resources of the forest for food, shelter, sport and leisure. And we have met a cast of colourful characters from kings and lords to commoners and criminals.

The long history of this forest's ownership and management has included various conflicts over the right of access. But today we can see how the Corporation of the City of London successfully manages the ancient forest landscape and its diverse users in a delicate balance. And the four local people who act as Verderers continue a tradition dating back almost one thousand years.

Directions 18

To return to Bury Road car park – With your back to Dannet's Hill, go straight on between wooden fences that mark a stream then bear left on the path to the car park (100 metres).

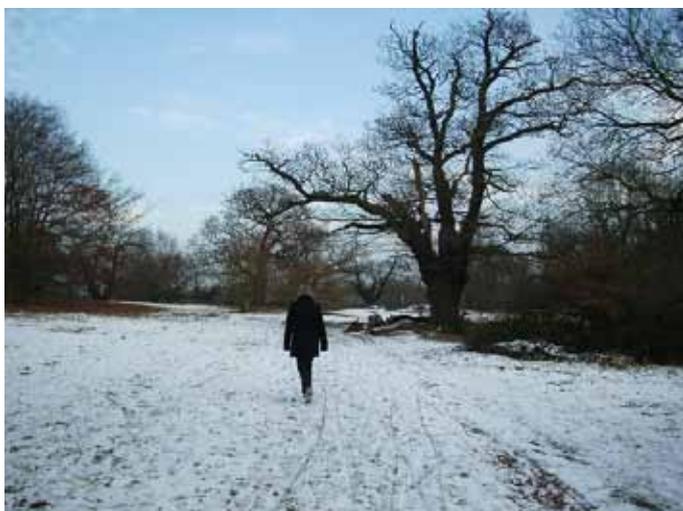
To return to Chingford railway station or bus station – With your back to Dannet's Hill, turn left and follow the path to the corner of Chingford Plain. Turn right along the main road and the transport connections are on the left side (400 metres).

Exploring other parts of Epping Forest

There is much to explore in Epping Forest. If you would like to visit another area of the forest we suggest getting hold of the official map which shows car parks, paths and trails, refreshments and other information.

Copies are available at the forest visitor centres or it can be downloaded from: www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/epping-forest/Documents/epping-forest-map.pdf.

The main visitor centre is at High Beech (IG10 4AE). It is open all year round on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays. Admission is free.



Epping Forest through the seasons (clockwise from top left)
winter walk, spring growth, summer in Bury Wood, autumn leaf carpet

John Davies, Geograph (CCL) / ProfDEH, Wikimedia Commons (CCL) / © Jenny Lunn / Stephen Craven, Geograph (CCL)

Credits

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Painting of pollarded trees in Epping Forest by Harry Barr (1948)
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