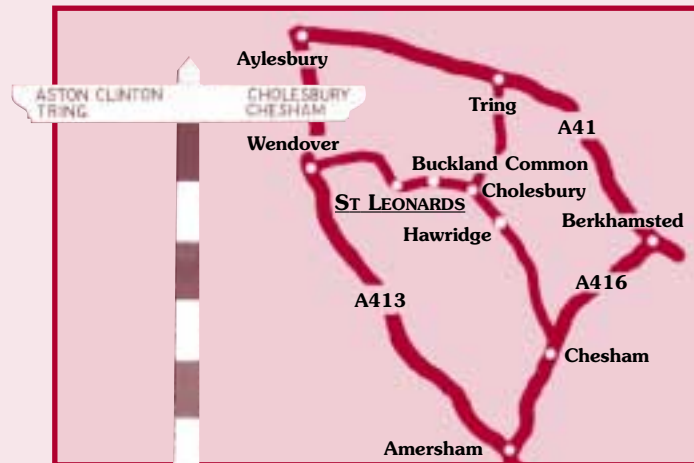


The Parish of Cholesbury-cum-St

Leonards in Buckinghamshire can be found to the north-west of Chesham. It stretches almost 4½ miles and at its highest point rises to over 230m within the Chiltern Hills, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There is evidence of prehistoric settlements and the area is mentioned in 8th century records. The four 'hilltop villages' that comprise the present-day Parish (Buckland Common, Cholesbury, Hawridge, and St Leonards) evolved during Saxon times from upland pastureland of so called 'strip-parishes' associated with villages downhill in the Aylesbury Vale, subsequently becoming detached hamlets and then villages. Together with the outlying areas of Braziers End, Heath End, Lanes End and The Vale they have constituted the civil parish since 1934.

Buckland Wood was originally replanted with beech to supply the Windsor Chair industry of High Wycombe. Until the 1950s, in common with many Chiltern woods, it was the location of Chair Bodgers making chair legs, spindles and stretchers. Each season a pair of bodgers would inspect, and then bid at auction for, a stand of timber within which they would set up an A-frame shelter, thatched and water-proofed, in which to house their lathe and tools. Trees were felled green, the timber was turned into logs using saw-pits and a wedge was used to split the logs into billets which were then skilfully shaped with an axe and beetle. Seated on a shaving horse the billet was then shaved with a draw knife. Using leg-power or an engine, a pole lathe was used to finish and decorate the section of chair. The sections were then left outside to season. Bodgers could produce 350 chair-sets a week and were paid at the factory gate. In 1914, each man could earn up to twenty shillings a week. The industry declined after the First World War as imports of cheaper wood increased and demand for wooden chairs fell.

DIRECTIONS



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Cholesbury-cum-St Leonards:-

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Jubilee Walks in the Hilltop Villages



3 ST LEONARDS & GRIM'S DITCH



Time 2 to 2½ hrs
Distance 3 miles or 5 km

Jubilee Walks in the Hilltop Villages

This is the third in a series of walks produced to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of HM Queen Elizabeth II in 2002 and the 40th Anniversary of the Local History Group. These walks aim to illustrate the local and natural history of the Parish. A particular feature of this walk is the activities of local people who have changed the landscape of the area over time.

Cholesbury-cum-St Leonards Local History Group

was founded in 1962 to stimulate interest in the Hilltop Villages. There is a monthly programme of talks from October to May. The group also carries out research and maintains an archive of items of historical interest. New members and visitors are always welcome.

St Leonards Common originally extended over more than 800 acres, stretching from St Leonards Church towards Aston Clinton and including Chivery – well beyond the present parish boundary. Although part was grazed, much of it was woodland from which faggots were collected, as well as scrub and marshland. The common disappeared when it was enclosed following the survey by Commissioners in 1811. The

land was allocated to some of those who previously held ‘Rights of Common’. The largest allotments were allocated to the Trustees of the Baldwin Estate, St Leonards Chapel and to the Rev John Jeffries as compensation for loss of tithes to which he had formerly been entitled. Many of the local cottagers lost all rights of access in favour of these larger landowners.



Grim’s Ditch defines the northern boundary of the parish. It is one of several ancient linear earthworks along the Chilterns escarpment which may have more than a single origin. The Anglo Saxons named features of mysterious origin ‘Grim’, after the Norse word *grimr* or devil, and a nick-name for Odin or Woden the God of War and Magic. Excavations in the 1970s found locally-made Iron Age pottery dating from around 650BC, although the ditch could be much older. The earliest local record of Grim’s Ditch is in the Missenden Abbey Cartulary which confirmed ownership of the ditches from 1170.

The earthwork was originally more than 13m wide. The ditch was larger here than elsewhere in the Chilterns at over 2m deep and 3.5m wide. Its shape and orientation confirm that it was not a defensive structure.

Historians suggest possible associations with Cholesbury Hillfort, both being of a similar age (see Walk No1). Grim’s Ditch may have defined boundaries between neighbouring tribal communities or separated the hilltop grazing pastures from the more fertile lowland arable land. Snail shells found in deposits suggest the area would have been clear of woodland or scrub at the time of construction.



Nowadays it is difficult to imagine how imposing Grim’s Ditch would have appeared at the time of the Saxons. Whatever its purpose, it would have been a major undertaking requiring sophisticated organisation of communal labour to construct and maintain it. Today, the impact of agriculture and changes in land use have obscured its features in places. Nevertheless walking along the short length that demarcates the northern edge of the parish leaves one in no doubt of the significance of Grim’s Ditch to the Ancient Britons.

The White Lion.

Around 1700 it was probably one of several illegal and reportedly disorderly alehouses in the village. The first deeds date from 1714. Later it was owned first by Wellers of Amersham and then by Benskins Brewery.



St Leonards Church was built in the 15th century on the site of a 12th century cell of Missenden



Abbey supposedly occupied by the ‘Hermit of the Woods’. The church was built by General Cornelius Wood in the 1690s and restored again in 1845.

The bell in the spired bell

turret records “chandler made me 1702”. It gained some notoriety during the early part of the 18th Century as a location of clandestine marriages.

The Parish Hall at St Leonards was built in 1938 and is run by a Management Committee. In

addition to the Local History Group organisations which regularly use the hall include the Women’s Institute, Horticultural Society, Thursday Club, Senior Club and the Little Bears Play Group, who make use of the childrens play area. Football takes place on the Playing Field as does St Leonards Parish Hall Fete in June each year.



Gilberts Hill is named after Samuel and Phoebe Gilbert who ran the local shop and Post Office in the house opposite the telephone kiosk. These closed in 1975. The Gilberts lived next door in Dundridge Cottage, parts of which date from the 16th century.