

## How to get there



Produced by Fitzpatrick Woodmer Design - 01634 711 771

**By Road:** From the centre of Hitchin follow the A600 towards Bedford. Approximately 1 mile from the town centre turn left into Burford Way which runs into Swinburne Ave. Parking is available at Swinburne Ave playing fields car park. Access also available to the site via Redhill Rd/Oughtonhead Lane but parking is limited.

**By Public Transport:** Nearest bus stops are on Bedford Rd and Burford Way/Swinburne Ave. For travel details contact Intalink Traveline on 0871 200 2233 or [www.intalink.org.uk](http://www.intalink.org.uk)

Oughtonhead Common Local Nature Reserve is owned and managed by North Hertfordshire District Council. The Council seeks to balance the need for sustainable development with the protection of the environment. Contact us at:

[www.north-herts.gov.uk](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk)  
Tel: 01462 474000

The Countryside Management Service (CMS) works with communities in Hertfordshire to help them care for and enjoy the environment. For more information contact us at:

[www.hertsdirect.org/CMS](http://www.hertsdirect.org/CMS) Tel: 01462 459395

Supported by



## Volunteering Opportunities:

The **Friends of Oughtonhead Common** get together regularly to carry out conservation tasks to: keep the site in the best condition, attract a diversity of wildlife and make it welcoming for visitors. Typical management tasks includes:

- Coppicing scrub to encourage re-growth and add to diversity of habitat
- Hedgelaying and hedgerow planting
- Wet ditch and river bank maintenance
- Gate and seat installation
- Path clearance



## Why Volunteer?

- Help maintain & improve the nature reserve
- Learn new skills
- Meet like-minded people

Contact CMS for more information

Unwind in the tranquillity of this ancient grazing Common within 2 miles of the centre of Hitchin

Local Nature Reserve



Enjoy a choice of River and Commons walks. Extensive surfaced paths suitable for wheelchair users and the less mobile. Footpath links with Hambridge and Icknield Ways and the Chilterns.

## Welcome to Oughtonhead Common Local Nature Reserve.

The site, to the west of Hitchin (see directions map), comprises the **Grazing Common** and the **River Oughton** running along its northern edge.

- A surfaced path follows the river and provides the **River Walk**.
- The **Commons Walk** follows a grassy path around the edge of the Common (see centre map page for full description of these walks).

### What you might see in different parts of the site:

**The River:** The clear waters arise from chalk springs running out of the Chiltern Hills to the west. The river has a rich plant community which



Water Crowfoot



Kingfisher

thrives in the pure water. Summer flowering and one of the most attractive is **Stream Water Crowfoot**, a relative of the buttercup. Woven fences have been erected in some places along the river bank to protect these plants, which can easily be damaged by dogs. At any time of the year, if you are quiet, you may see a flash of turquoise as a **Kingfisher** darts by.

**The Reed and Sedge Beds:** These are permanently wet areas, except in the driest of summers. **Frogs** may start mating as early as February but by March frog spawn and hatched tadpoles will be present. In summer they are alive with bird activity with **Reed** and **Sedge Warblers** nesting here.



Ladies Smock

### Wet Grassland and Wet Ditches:

These wet areas are what most of the Common used to be like. Plants, like the delicate **Ladies Smock** flowering in early spring and the **Southern Marsh Orchid** flowering in early summer, prefer these wetter areas. In summer you may see various species of **Dragonfly** and **Damselfly** and the colourful **Burnet Moth** which often feeds on the flowers of **Marsh Thistle**. Throughout the year you should see **English Longhorn** cattle grazing in the grassland.



Burnet Moth

**Dry Grassland:** In winter, large flocks of **Finches** feed on seed in the grassland and adjacent farmland. In summer, wildflowers attract many grassland species of butterfly such as **Meadow Brown** and **Ringlet** and you may hear a **Green Woodpecker** with its unmistakable “yaffle”.

Photos courtesy of Terry Cavner, Gert Ellstrom, Phil Lumley, Nick Upton and N. Herts Museum Service.

**Hedgerows and Bushes:** Mainly around the edge of the Common, these provide important food and shelter for wildlife. In spring **Blackthorn**, **Hawthorn** and **Elder** provide a profusion of white blossom to be followed by late summer and autumn fruit. Along with **Buckthorn**



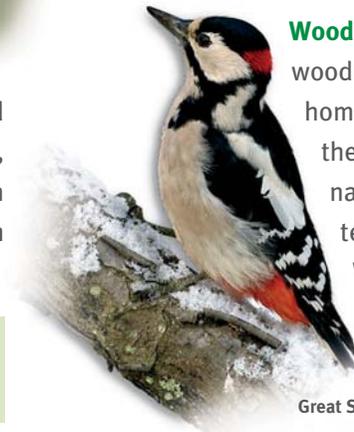
Male Orange Tip

and **Ivy** berries, these attract many winter birds to the Common including **Fieldfare** and **Redwing**. In early spring, bright yellow **Lesser Celandine** flowers under the bare bushes taking advantage of plentiful sunlight. Spring butterflies include **Orange Tip**, the yellow **Brimstone** and **Speckled Wood** which prefers the dappled shade around the Common’s edges.



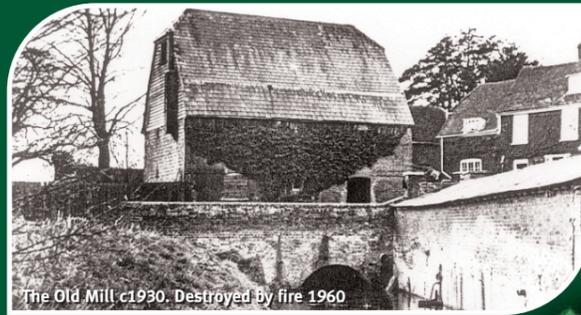
Speckled Wood

**Woodland:** Trees around the site and woodland to the north of the river are home to many birds. In early spring the **Chiffchaff**, a bird that sings its name, will be heard setting up its territory and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** can often be seen or heard in the tops of trees drumming for insects.



Great Spotted Woodpecker

**Industry and Agriculture.** A working corn mill once stood at Westmill Farm (c1600 -c1900, see photo). Creation of the deep, straight Mill Stream, which powered the mill, altered the course of the original river. North of the river is a wet area where willow, reed and rush were once grown and harvested. The area fell into neglect in the 1920s when demand for these products dwindled. It is now Oughtonhead Nature Reserve run by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (not accessible to the public).



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**Grazing.** The site was originally a medieval “cow common” where Hitchin “commoners” grazed their cattle. Of little use as agricultural land due to its wetness and winter flooding, this was one of the few uses the land could be put to. Grazing maintained a rich diversity of plant and bird life for which the site was renowned in times past. The cessation of grazing (c1914) led to scrub invasion and threatened the grassland habitat. In 1996, grazing with English Longhorn cattle was re-introduced, thus restoring an ancient tradition and controlling further scrub invasion.



**River Walk - Bedford Rd to The Chalky (2km). Surfaced path; suitable for all users.**

The path can be accessed from the Bedford Rd entrance or any of the three surfaced side-paths running off Burford Way. All have kissing gate access suitable for wheelchairs (Westmill Lane has access for large mobility vehicles (RADAR gate)).

At **1** note Alder trees with small cones and the arching stems of Pendulous Sedge; both like wet conditions. **2** The overflow for the Mill Stream is known locally as “Hitchin Waterfall”. Here the river divides for a while forming a small island. **3** Opening to the west is the ancient Grazing Common, now grazed by English Longhorn cattle. **4** Across the river is Oughtonhead Nature Reserve (not open to the public) an area of wet woodland dominated by Alder and Silver Birch. The walk finishes at The Chalky a popular picnic site but can be extended a further 500m to take in the Springhead, the source of the River Oughton.

**Commons Walk - Long (1.5km); short (0.75km). Grassy paths, can be slippery in winter.**

The path can be accessed from the River Walk, the Car Park at Swinburne Ave or from Redhill Rd via Oughtonhead Lane. Kissing gate access is not suitable for wheelchairs.

**5** The path skirts around the three Grazing Compartments; English Longhorn cattle, an ancient breed, usually graze all year round. **6** Take a short detour to view the Cattle Pond where toads and newts breed in the spring. Once back on the main path, a turning off to the left provides the short route back to the Car Park which passes between the Grazing Compartments. **7** The towering Beech trees in The Spinney were planted in 1842 by the Lucas family who lived at Old Westmill farmhouse. **8** This part of the site is the driest, the grassland here being very different from that nearer the river. However, springs are still active here, feeding a wet ditch system running through the middle of the meadow. The walk ends when it meets the River Walk at **3**.

**Key**

- Surfaced Path
- River Walk/Restricted Byway (permitted users: pedestrians, cyclists, horse riders, horse-drawn carriages)
- Wet Ditches
- Grazing compartment fence-line
- Commons Walk
- Large mobility vehicle access gate (RADAR)
- Wheelchair Access

**Please follow the Countryside Code:**

- Be thoughtful to other users
- Take your litter home
- Leave the wildlife site as you found it.

If you have a dog with you please keep it under control to avoid disturbing the cattle and the birds, especially during the nesting season. Dog bins are provided at most entrances to the site. Thank you.

We hope you enjoy your visit. For more information on this and other sites in N. Herts and other walks in the area visit [www.hertsdirect.org/CMS](http://www.hertsdirect.org/CMS).

Contact CMS at The Old Dairy, Bedford Road, Ickleford, Hitchin, Herts SG5 3RR. e-mail: [north.cms@hertscc.gov.uk](mailto:north.cms@hertscc.gov.uk) tel: 01462 459395