

# Beenham and Woolhampton: Villages, Woods and Fields

5k (3 miles) on well-drained paths and tracks. Park in Beenham Village, or, if intending to use it, park at The Six Bells pub. SU583689 delivers.showcase.spouse. OS Explorer Map 159.

Passing the Six Bells pub on your right (turn right out of its car park), after about 200yds, take the track on the left.

1. Greyfield Wood is a 38 acre mix of ancient woodland and commercial trees offering a varied habitat for a wide range of wildlife, including 37 species of bird and at least 14 species of butterfly. The woodland is managed by volunteers. Permitted paths offer interesting detours.



Pasture, Beenham  
© Geograph – Andrew Smith

Follow the main track keeping the wood to your right. After some 300yds bear left across fields to a junction of five paths. Bear half right towards the prominent buildings of Douai Abbey.

2. A Benedictine foundation (Paris, 1615), Douai Abbey provided a centre for English monks at the Sorbonne and Catholic exiles. It moved to Douai in Northern France after the French Revolution but was expelled in 1903. Now occupying the former site of St Mary's College, the Gothic Revival abbey church dates from 1928.

Follow the footpath past the new housing behind the abbey. On reaching the public road, take the lane opposite for about 300yds to reach the Anglican church. Go left through the churchyard to a gate on the other side.

3. St Peter's Upper Woolhampton was originally built in the 13th century. It was probably associated with the Knights Hospitaller who owned the Woolhampton and Brimpton estate. The church was extended in 1861 and has fine stained glass windows.

Cross the sports field keeping to the right-hand side, over a metalled drive, before shortly coming out on a lane. Walk right, down the road to the farm entrance, where a permissive path to the right skirts the paddocks at the edge of Gravelpit Copse; or take the footpath on the left and pass a succession of five narrow pinch-stiles through the paddocks of Malthouse Farm.

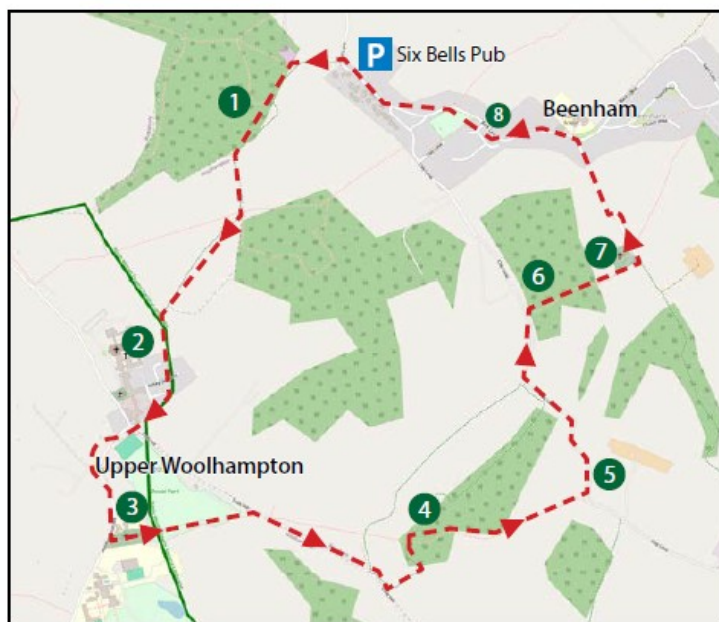
4. The aptly named Gravelpit Copse (a Local Nature Reserve) contains a tangle of shallow quarries. These probably provided suitable materials in the days when parishes had to maintain their own roads.

Take the bridlepath to the right through the wood, downhill for some 400yds, until you cross a bridge, turning left onto a wider track.

5. This is Clay Lane, part of an ancient route from the grazing



*Equisetum Arvense*  
© Geograph – Bob-Harvey



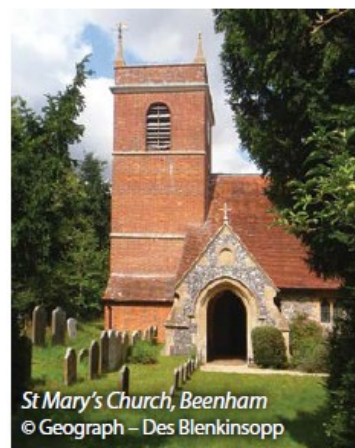
areas on Bucklebury Common down to the Kennet Valley marshes. Look for interesting plants on its banks such as horsetail, once used to polish pewter.

In 200yds turn right through the gate into Old Copse and follow the footpath steeply uphill to St Mary's Church, keeping to the south side of the wood.

6. Old Copse SSSI has numerous coppice stools which used to supply poles, sticks and firewood. It has bluebells, wood anemone, golden saxifrage, wild daffodils and many other plants.

7. St Mary's Church was twice damaged by fire. The tower was rebuilt in 1794 and the rest of the church in 1860-71. There is a ring of six bells dating back to 1859 containing the salvaged metal of an earlier peal that melted in the first destructive fire, thus more than halving the cost of the new bells.

8. The village of Beenham is first mentioned in 956AD as Benna's Hamme – meaning



St Mary's Church, Beenham  
© Geograph – Des Blenkinsopp

'Benna's enclosure' but is not mentioned in Domesday Book. The church and manor were granted to Reading Abbey on its foundation by Henry I in 1121. The earliest settlements grew up on the ridge at Beenham Stocks and at the west end near the Six Bells. During the Civil War 1642-46 the area was 'no man's land' and many skirmishes took place.

Leaving the churchyard, turn left. Turn left again at the road junction to return to the pub.

Margery Slatter