

## VILLAGE PROBUS CLUB OF HARPENDEN



# BULLETIN



AN OCCASIONAL REPORT ON CLUB ACTIVITIES

**Issue: April 2026**

**12 March**

### Paul Stocks' Induction

Club Chairman Paul Manuel extended a warm welcome to new member Paul Stocks at our March lunch.



**17 March**

### March Walk

Four walkers had signed up to fight the odds of spring colds and were joined by David Stevenson for his very first Probus Walk. We were truly rewarded by glorious spring sunshine, awakening the hedges green. The walk covered part of the MIMRAM RIVER valley, north of Welwyn between Whitwell and Hertford. For security (underfoot conditions) and poor signposting I dropped the idea to explore it from the Tewin side. Instead, I chose the Hertfordshire Walker Route 181 between Birch Green and Hertingfordbury to about 7.4km.

The walk started in Hertingfordbury at The White Horse, heading south through the picturesque village. Turning into St Mary's Lane, the tranquil country road crosses the bridge of the disused Cole Green railway. We used this part of the Lea Valley Walk to cut short Route 181, which we rejoined after about 1.5 km to turn right towards Birch Green. We zigzag NW through the 1950s housing estate towards the old coach road. Leaving behind the jolly noise of the Primary School we turned left at the coach road and immediately right to the North towards the busy A414 taking the foot bridge into PANSHANGER PARK.

We crossed the dirt road of the ongoing excavation traffic, passed the Forty Acres wetlands before we entered the woodland. No wild (?) boar seen but a heron, some lapwings and a buzzard. At the bottom of the woodland, we walked along the MIMRAM with its series of (excavation) lakes. At KINGS LAKE we turned left to cross the river. No presence of English Longhorn cattle yet, we continued east along the OSPREY LAKE to our right. Before a reed swamp with platforms of the Dragon Fly Trail - too early to see any activity yet - we turned right. Looking back along the OSPREY LAKE hides allow us to observe waterfowl, swans, ducks and moor hens, no sign of an osprey though! A passing Spitfire made up for it!

The walk finished crossing the Mimram River again, taking the underpass of the A414, the river to our right and horse paddocks to our left. Eventually joining the road into Hertingfordbury, we crossed the river at the Water Mill, used until the 1930s, now converted to flats. Little further, we reached our pub where we had an excellent lunch! Our dog Mira had certainly earned a little bit of my Beef Burger having braved a pack of German Pointers earlier!



Reflecting on the history of the immediate vicinity: Hertingfordbury has been mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) as *Herefordingberie* (a stronghold of the people of Hertford). Nice read on the History page of the Parish Council, where it lists “*villans (1 Frenchman), borders, cottars and slaves*”. Information about Panshanger predates the Domesday book (King Edward) but more recent history mentions Earl Cowper as the owner, a relation to the poet Cowper. It’s an area certainly worth visiting again. The websites of the Parish Council and Church point to an active social life.

*Report by Walk Leader - Goetz Richter*

23 March

### Discussion Group

Law and Disorder!

A lively debate ensued at our monthly meeting - primarily about the potential loss of jury trials for all but serious crimes in the UK, set against a background of a rapidly rising backlog of Court work – entailing the use of Judge only Courts, and a possibly halving of all jury trials. It is well known that juries present the last opportunity for defendants seeking a ‘not guilty’ result or a possibly softened sentence.

John Bryant set out a set of UK litigation statistics, recalling also the Post Office fiasco. Alongside the above the trends of criminal activity show an overall downward path – homicide down, violence, firearms and knife crime down, but fraud beginning to rise, entailing increasing technology to combat the situation.

There were those in our group for and against the government’s plan, with no absolute vote either way.

*Report by Discussion Leader - John Bryant*

1 April

### Past Chairmen's Lunch

Each year, past chairmen of the club get together for a lunch and to chew over old times. Organised by the immediate past chairman, this year’s event was held at the Prae Wood Hotel in St Albans.

Eleven past chairmen were available to attend out of the 14 who are still club members. No club business is done as the event is simply for enjoyment of each other’s company. The food was good and the beverages taken in moderation in a conveniently quiet corner of the restaurant.



The challenge for everybody who wasn't there is to identify all of those who attended, although there are no prizes.

*Report by Lunch Organiser - Colin Robinson*

1 April

### Alan Cox Trophy

The Probus Bowls competition 2026 for the Alan Cox Trophy again proved popular with Club members and was enjoyed by all.

As usual practices began in early January and ended at the end of February with the handicapped knock-out competition taking place in March.

12 players took part in the competition - a slightly higher number than in recent years. We were pleased to welcome Chris Smith and Keith Hamilton to the fray and both acquitted themselves very well. As usual, the less experienced bowlers played each other in the first round such that Bryan Coventry, David Stevenson and Jan Grunberg prevailed into the second round.

Also in the first round, more experienced bowlers Doug Knowles and Keith Hamilton had a very close game which Doug won narrowly before going on to have success over previous winner Doug Hall in the second round. He then prevailed against Alan Falconer in the semi-final to become one of the finalists.

In the other half of the draw, last year's champion Sandy Bisland prevailed over Bryan Coventry in the second round but lost to Steve Maynard at the semi-final stage.

This led to an absorbing final between Doug Knowles and Steve Maynard. Doug started strongly and was leading 10-2 after 6 ends. However, Steve then found his preferred length and mounted a strong comeback eventually winning 21-13 in a very good match lasting 1.5 hours.



Many congratulations to Steve on regaining the Alan Cox Trophy for 2026.

I would like to thank Sandy Bisland for overseeing the competition stage during my absence in March this year and for keeping all the competitors informed of the players' progress during the rounds.

*Report by Bowls Competition Organiser - Roy Polley*

9 April

#### David Cowan's Induction

Club Chairman Paul Manuel extended a warm welcome to new member David Cowan at our April lunch.

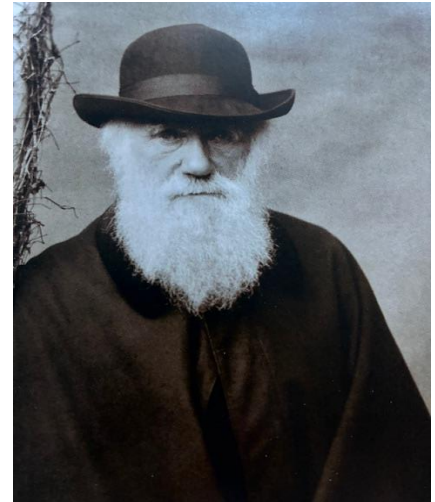


14 April

#### Visit to Down House - Charles Darwin's Home

Most unfortunately the organiser, Ernie Richardson was unable to join the visit due to ill health and we then had four dropping out the day before our visit. But the remaining 24 of us left Church Green promptly at 9.00am by coach to travel to the village of Downe, near Orpington, via the Queen Elizabeth 11 Bridge at Dartford. Amazing what the car drivers usually miss on the M25. A very narrow country lane took us to our venue. A warm sunny day. Greeted by our two guides who were taking one group round the house in the morning and garden in the afternoon and the other group in reverse order.

The volunteer guide spent a considerable amount of time on the family tree and there were at least two marriages to members of the Josiah Wedgwood family. I think it was Darwin's grandfather who was 6 ft 2 ins tall and weighed 30 stone. The dining table had been cut into to accommodate his paunch! Darwin lived at Down House for forty years from 1842 until his death. Also, home to his first cousin, wife Emma and their ten children – three of them died very young. The birth of their final child, Charles, prompted extensions in the same Georgian style as the existing building. The ground floor rooms were filled with family portraits, furniture and personal possessions as though the family still lived there. His study held several of his scientific instruments, books and papers. Not unexpectedly several of the rooms contained bookcases. The dining room was set for dinner for 8 with unsurprisingly a Wedgwood Dinner set. The guide pointed out the large chair at the head of the table and had been surprised by one visitor mentioning almost casually that she had the other original 7 in her dining room – she was one of the granddaughters.



Emma was said to be an accomplished pianist and her grand piano was in the drawing room. Charles and Emma were said to be unusually broad-minded Victorian parents and the approach stemmed from their own liberal upbringing. Some sort of slide was linked in to the stairs in the hallway for the children to play on.

We gathered together for lunch in one of the upstairs rooms next to the Museum and Exhibition.

The garden tour had a volunteer guide in the morning but the afternoon group had the Head Gardener. He has one paid member of staff and around 50 volunteers. The rear of the house was covered by a very large wisteria but alas the decorators had not taken particular care when painting the windows and hardly any flowers were to be seen this year to the utter dismay of the Head Gardener. The Down House purchase had 18 acres of land including a lawn, kitchen garden and hay meadow. Banks were formed from spoil from the building works and with shrubs provided protection from the wind.



There were 6 large oblong flower beds, dominated by tulips at our visit. Produce from fruit trees used for home consumption. A very large mulberry tree dominated one side of the lawn. We then entered the very large walled kitchen garden. At one side were the greenhouses and a hothouse although we only entered the smallest one. As well as providing supplies to the kitchen Darwin conducted many experiments. In the front garden which was mainly lawn there still remained cut into the lawn about a square yard which Darwin left to nature for whatever plants to grow. In a large meadow at the rear he created a quarter mile walk named Sandwalk and considered this his thinking path. Time precluded us from venturing along the walk.

Unfortunately, the M25 had issues at Dartford and we had to follow the "long way" back taking nearly 3 hours – so producing an "added bonus" of almost a full circuit of the M25.

Our thanks are due to Ernie Richardson for the organisation of a most enjoyable and interesting trip and which this report does not attempt to cover in full.

*Report by Stand-in Visit Leader - Graham Westwell*

19 April

## April Walk - Gorhambury Estate

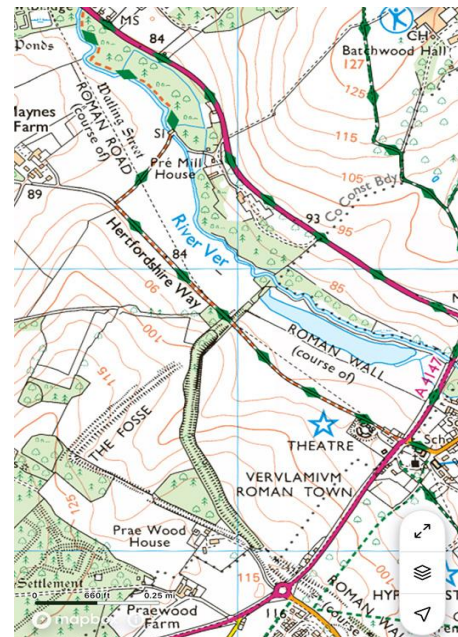
Co-organiser Bryan King was recovering from illness and couldn't join us. So 9 of us gathered at the Six Bells, St Michael's Street, St. Albans on a warm sunny morning but with a cold wind. After ordering our lunches we set off round the corner to enter the Gorhambury Estate. After less than 100 yards we came across children dancing round the maypole in the yard of St Michael's C of E VA Primary School.

Past the imposing gatehouse through the entrance gate and there on the left was the unique.....

**Roman Theatre of Verulamium.** Built in about 140 AD it is the only example of its kind in Britain, being a theatre with a stage rather than an Amphitheatre. Initially, the arena would have been used for anything from religious processions and dancing, to wrestling, armed combat and wild beast shows. From about 180 AD the stage came into greater use and the auditorium was extended. By about 300 AD, after some redevelopment work, the Theatre could seat 2000 spectators. The entrance gate was padlocked as the 2026 season does not start until June.

We strolled along the metalled permissive path (actually a roadway) and part of the Hertfordshire Way. See map for the relationship to Watling Street and Fosse Way. We briefly stopped at the small building complex, **Maynes House and Farm**, which, since 2012, has been the home of the Earl and Countess of Verulam. Some of the buildings there are Grade II listed.

Onwards up the incline to **Gorhambury House**; commissioned by James Grimston, the 3rd Viscount Grimston and constructed in the years 1777-84 by Sir Robert Taylor. The house is Grade II Listed and is built in a neo-Palladian style. It is one of the largest houses completed by the architect who is known for his work on The Bank of England. Has been lived in by the Grimston family since it was constructed. 240 years after the first stones were laid. Eight generations of the family have loved and looked after the house through radical economic and political changes, two world wars and occupation by the Special Overseas Executive (MI6) and Port Regis preparatory school.



The current Earl and Countess of Verulam undertook extensive works to the roof, electrical rewiring, repaired chimneys, introduced some central heating and furnished the rooms beautifully in 1970s and 80s. But by 2012 when their son and daughter-in-law Viscount and Viscountess Grimston (daughter of Duke of Roxburgh) moved in much of this work required updating. What followed was the most extensive building work to have been carried out since Gorhambury's inception. Newspaper talk of selling farmland in East Anglia and the accounts for 2024/5 show sales at £16 million which presumably covered the cost.

Another 400 yards round the back of the new House and we arrived at **Old Gorhambury**. Built for Sir Nicholas Bacon (1510-1579), who at that time was Lord Keeper of the Great Seal during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

It is rumoured that when the Queen visited Gorhambury in 1572 she remarked "My Lord, what a little house you have gotten" to which Bacon replied "Madam, my house is well, but you have made me too great for my house!" This comment struck a nerve and Bacon built a galleried extension to the house for her second visit to Gorhambury in 1577.

The house passed to Sir Nicholas's son Francis (1561-1626), who was a philosopher and statesman, serving as Lord Chancellor to King James I.

The ruins do not represent the size of the original extended house as displayed on notice boards around the site. Time for a wander round and a photo call and we started our return journey.



In the fields were sheep, lambs and long horn cattle and of course pheasants and one or two partridges.



About half a mile from the entrance we met up with Doug Hall who had undertaken the short walk and had ventured down to the Lake. We passed a small section of the original Roman outer wall and strolled back to the Six Bells for lunch where we met up with Alan Falconer. Distance around 4.5 miles.

**Interesting background** (with thanks to Richard Upton)

The Six Bells, (named after the then Six Bells in the adjacent church of St Michael's, there are now 8) was built in the 1500s as a wooden framed building typical of its medieval time. Much of the debris left from Roman Verulamium was used in its construction. Most of the tower of St Michaels is built of Roman bricks. Recent archaeological investigations showed that the pub was built on top of the remains of a Roman bath house and the 12th century church on top of the Roman Forum.

Verulamium was located, not under modern day St Albans as often supposed, but at the bottom of the hill with the Norman Abbey at its summit, straddling what is now the A4147 to Hemel. The bulk of the town was to the north under what are now fields as part of the Gorhambury Estate.

## Further background

The 7<sup>th</sup> and current Earl, a merchant banker, inherited the title from his father in 1973. Much of the wealth is tied up in art and about 1,500 acres of land. A 15th-century portrait of an ancient forebear, Edward Grimston, was included in a list of Britain's 25 most important privately owned paintings. It has been on loan to the National Gallery since 1927.

The name Gorhambury is derived from Geoffrey de Gorham, the sixteenth Abbot of St. Albans, who had been induced to leave Normandy and come to England by Richard de Albini, the fifteenth Abbot, to take charge of the famous Grammar School of the Abbey.

Surprisingly few of the walkers had visited Old Gorhambury before and so very appropriate as Francis Bacon died 400 years ago this year.

*Report by Walk Leader - Graham Westwell  
With thanks to Doug Hall and David Keith for photographs*

27 April

## Discussion Group - Journey into Space

The meeting kicked off with Sandy Bisland reminding the 14 other members present of how space exploration has evolved over the decades.

The first space race was between the USSR and USA and lasted from 1957 until 1975. During that time the USSR achieved many "firsts", but didn't go as far as landing humans on the Moon, which the USA did on 2 July 1969.

There followed a period of relative international cooperation culminating in the USA, Russia and others manning the International Space Station, which celebrated 25 years of continuous human presence on 2 November 2025.

The current space race involves the USA and China (and to a lesser extent India and Russia) attempting to colonise the Moon and then proceed to Mars.

In parallel with those endeavours there has been much activity sending probes to planets within our solar system and observing galaxies well beyond our own Milky Way.

National spends on space activities are typically around 0.1% of GDP with the exception of the USA which budgeted 0.28% of GDP (close to \$80B) in 2024. The UK budget is lower than many at only 0.05 – 0.07% of GDP.

In recent years greater than 50% of budgets have focused on military objectives. There is also a significant trend towards augmenting government spends by creating commercial partnerships with companies such as Space X, Blue Origin and Arianespace.

There followed a wide-ranging discussion on the pros/cons of low earth orbit endeavours, colonisation of the Moon and colonisation of Mars (with occasional diversions into alien life and the expanding universe!).

In general there was agreement on the benefits accrued and expected from low earth orbit activities such as satellite navigation, global communications, climate/weather monitoring, medical innovations and the potential for microgravity experiments leading to breakthroughs in biology, physics and material science.

There was less of a consensus on colonising the Moon. Despite the claimed benefits (unobstructed astronomy, unique research environment, stepping stone to Mars, etc.), the idea of a massive multinational collaboration for the benefit of mankind was considered fanciful. The prevailing view was that the participating nations are betting on a "land grab" to increase their own national resources and power.

The prospect of colonising Mars was viewed with considerable scepticism. It would be a hugely difficult and expensive undertaking. Additionally, the physiological impacts on those living on Mars are likely to be substantial. Although the endeavour may generate technological benefits on Earth, the pro-colonisation view that humanity must expand to survive and thrive was not shared by the group. Time will tell.

*Report by Discussion Leader - Sandy Bisland*