

## VILLAGE PROBUS CLUB OF HARPENDEN



# BULLETIN



AN OCCASIONAL REPORT ON CLUB ACTIVITIES

Issue: September 2025

14 August

### Club AGM

During this successful AGM, Club Chairmanship was passed from Colin Robinson to Paul Manuel.



The result of our latest photograph competition was announced at the end of the AGM. The competition's theme was "Spring" and the winning entry was judged to be this splendid photo of bluebells in Knott Wood by David Butler.

19 August

### August Walk

On Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> August, 11 of us set off on a 4.5-mile walk from the village of Pirton. The weather was dry, a little overcast, but perfect for striding out and enjoying the scenery and fresh air.

Pirton is listed in the Domesday book as Periton, from the old English for pear and settlement. There is evidence that people lived here in the late Iron Age more than 2100 years ago.

Pirton was, in medieval times, a strategically important village within the 'Hitchin Gap' astride the Icknield Way that joins the Ridgeway at Ivinghoe to the Peddars Way in Norfolk. These well-defined paths enabled traders, drovers and soldiers, etc. to travel from Dorset to the north Norfolk coast and all points in between. We can think about it as one of the motorways of its time. Even the Romans used a lot of the route for their roads.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, during the period known as 'The Anarchy', there was an 18-year war of succession -- although it was a

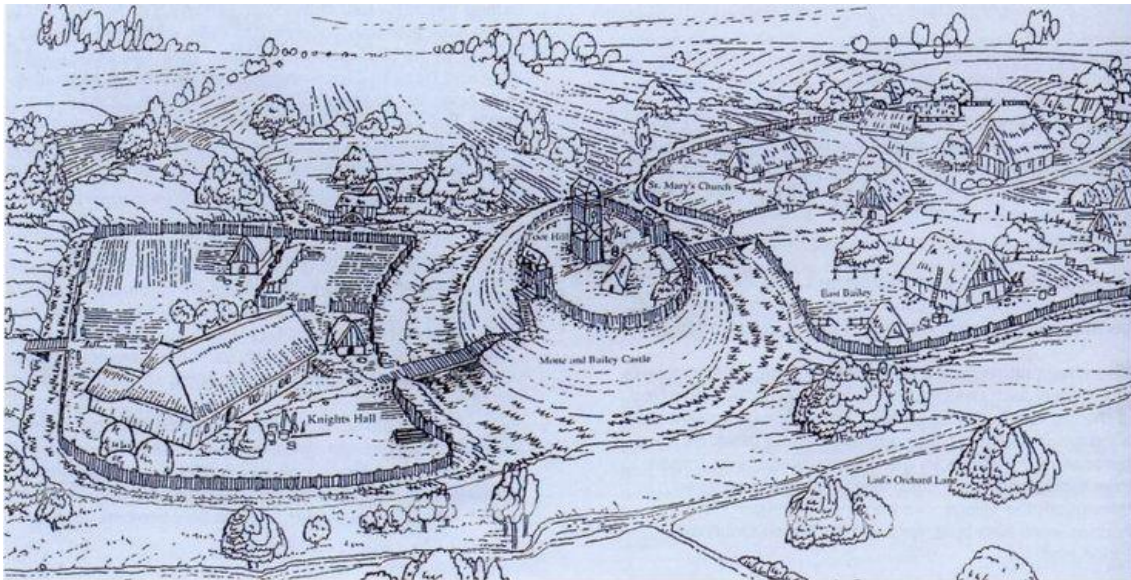
series of skirmishes rather than any pitched battles.

Henry I, the son of William the Conqueror, lost his own son in a shipwreck and nominated his daughter, Matilda, to be his successor. This did not receive full support from the Norman barons.

On Henry's death Stephen, William's grandson, seized the crown to the irritation of those barons who supported Henry. Matilda, granddaughter of William who was often styled Empress because she was the widow of the Holy Roman Emperor, disputed Stephen's claim to the throne. Battle ensued. As time moved on Matilda retired to her estates in Normandy where she married Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, with whom she had a son, another Henry.

Back in England, to protect key positions, a series of motte and bailey castles, historians say 600, were built including one at Pirton. These castles were simple and quickly built. Their design was off the shelf, a bit like a flat pack, which is appropriate since the Normans were Norse men (Vikings) just like the founders of IKEA.

A motte is created by the upcast from digging protective ditches (often flooded to make moats) round the motte and the bailey. The motte would have a tower, and the bailey, outbuildings which could include a church, manor house, knights' hall, storage and barns etc. Pirton was a little unusual in that it had two baileys. In our area there is a rare motte and three Baileys – it's in Totterhoe.



Motte and any baileys were protected, within their ditches, by wooden palisades. The motte with its elevated views would have a battlemented wooden (very occasionally stone) tower on top of it into which the people would retreat if necessary. There is no evidence that Pirton was ever attacked but it served its purpose, protecting the medieval 'motorway'.

King Stephen had no heir and after years of conflict the war was settled by negotiation. It was agreed that, on Stephen's death, Matilda's son Henry would succeed him. Little did Stephen know that this would happen sooner than anyone expected. He died of disease within a year.

Henry, Matilda's son became Henry II, the founder and first of the Plantagenets, after his father's and his surname.

Little remains of most motte and baileys now except their ground works. There are a few exceptions such as those where the tower was built in stone. Famous examples are Kenilworth and Windsor which were both developed from their original motte and bailey cores.

In Pirton the motte and bailey are in the centre of the village. St Mary's church was in the eastern Bailey. All that is visible today is the church which still stands, though significantly added to over the years, and the motte, known locally as Toot Hill (from the old English for lookout hill), and lots of grassy mounds and undulations.



Our walkers at the foot of Toot Hill.



Anyway, after all the history, a good walk was had and we retired for our excellent lunch to the Motte and Bailey pub -- highly appropriate I thought.

By the way, during the walk we didn't see any pear trees but quite a few English walnuts. In the village there is Walnut Tree Farm so maybe Pirton should be renamed Walnut Town.

Walnuts are a fruit, botanically called a pseudo drupe, similar to a peach where the stone, or pit, contains the seed. David Butler demonstrated by picking one and opening it to reveal the walnut.

I don't recommend you do this yourself because the juices are full of tannins and can stain your fingers. It can take weeks to remove!



*Report by Walk Leader -- Richard Upton*

*Photos taken by David Butler*

**1 September**

### **Discussion Group**

This Discussion Group's meeting was on the 1st September 2025 at our regular venue, The Engineer.

The group was well attended with 11 members taking part. Mike Stevens presented our theme of the day "Educating England".

Beginning with an historical recollection of how education of children has evolved over the last millennia the discussion focussed in on post war developments leading up to Academisation and Multi Academy Trusts and how good education actually is in todays world.

All our members have personal recollections of their own education, that of their children and for some that of their grandchildren. There was good debate about how effective schools are today and whether our children are being suitably prepared for their place in the world.

Our meeting rounded off, as always, with lunch and a libation. All members appreciated the hospitality afforded us by the staff at the Engineer.

*Report by Discussion Leader -- Mike Stevens*

**25 September**

### **September Walk**

Dawn on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> September looked like it was going to be a good day and so it was, later becoming a beautiful Autumnal day. No wind at first, but a fairly strong wind rising through the morning and coming directly out of the East.

We were fifteen walkers in total, including some newer Members, which was good to see. All but one are shown in this group photo below, looking generally very relaxed after the first three miles.





Photo taken on the old Palladian bridge at Hoo Park, near Kimpton

The walk was over the low rolling Chiltern Hills: starting on the high ground of Ayot St. Lawrence, going down the slope into a valley, in which sits Kimpton, and we walked through its best features around the church.



Leaving Kimpton, we continued past the church and up a low rise to the west entrance of Hoo Park on a ridge at the northern end of the walk.

In Saxon, or maybe old English, "Hoo" meant a spur of land, a ridge, or heel-shaped hill. In this case it was the name of the family who owned the estate from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. It must have been impressive in its halcyon days. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the land around the Hall was converted into a landscaped park by William Chambers and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, whose nickname came from his fondness for describing country estates as having great 'capabilities' for improvement.

We skirted the edge of the estate encountering a patch of Sorghum Grass, (*supposedly "a nutrient powerhouse, containing a gluten-free, rich nutritional profile that includes fibre that aids in slowing down the absorption of glucose, preventing rapid spikes in blood sugar"*). There was also what looked like a "re-positioned" work of art.



There the ground falls away down to a Palladian bridge, at the east end of the estate, where the photo of the lads, above, was taken in a shallow valley where a chalk-stream called the river Mimram flows very gently.





In the 18<sup>th</sup> century this bridge would have formed the very impressive entry to the estate, with the river Mimram running under it, but dammed to produce a lake, rather like that at Brocket Hall, and others. Now, alas, although the bridge is still well maintained the area around it is a scruffy wilderness and the Mimram is culverted.



In 1770 the estate passed through the family, descending with the title of Lord Dacre, the twenty-third Lord Dacre being elevated to Viscount Hampden in 1884. The third Viscount Hampden sold the estate in 1938, it being subsequently in divided ownership. The house was demolished in 1958 and a group of several new houses were built on the site during the 1990s.



The walk followed the course of the Mimram to the point where this valley joined the same valley as Kimpton, at the now dis-used Kimpton Mill and cress beds. Then back up the incline to Ayot and The Brockett Arms pub for lunch. It was a grand day and a very companionable walk.

*Report by Walk Leader -- David Keith*

**29 September**

### **Discussion Group**

A meeting of the Discussion Group was held at the Engineer on 29th September. The discussion was entitled "Pandemic revisited"

The group had a wide-ranging discussion on the origins of the term pandemic, its likely source in China (wet markets v

the Wuhan institute of Virology) and the chronology of the outbreak and its management by the government of the day and by the medical specialities involved. In particular we also examined how lockdowns affected outcomes, comparing them to Sweden where no lockdowns took place, and considered the ongoing impacts on education, healthcare, and other services – and the effects on the mental health of students and other young people.. Finally, we discussed the side effects of vaccination and its benefits in bringing the outbreak to a conclusion.

*Report by Discussion Leader -- Guy Kenyon*