

VILLAGE PROBUS CLUB OF HARPENDEN



BULLETIN



AN OCCASIONAL REPORT ON CLUB ACTIVITIES

Issue: August 2026

14 July

July Walk

On a peaceful, fine and sunny day 10 members met at the Lytton Arms in Old Knebworth.

The Lytton Arms is named after the Lytton family who have owned Knebworth House for 19 generations (that's 570 years).

In the last (meagre) 50 years the estate has become one of the biggest outdoor music venues in the UK. The weekend before our walk, Iron Maiden, the heavy metal rock band from Essex, held their Eddfest (named after their zombie mascot Edd) to celebrate the 50th year of their founding. Something like 100,000 fans attended. The biggest music event in UK history was held here when Robbie Williams entertained 375,000 over two days in 2003.

Oblivious to the preceding weekend's activity we set off to find the deer park with no deer in it but a lot of car parking equipment from the weekend's concert being cleared away.

Passing through we stopped for a moment at the obelisk raised on the death of Lady Elizabeth Bulwer-Lytton in 1842 which gives me the opportunity to say that, over time, the Lyttons have, through marriage, combined with other families such as Bulwer, Lutyens and Cobbold. Indeed, the current owner of Knebworth is the 3rd Barron Cobbold (aka Henry Lytton-Cobbold). Did you know that any member of the titled aristocracy can call themselves 'Lord' and Henry is often so styled. The most senior aristocrats do not follow this practice but stick to their Dukes and Dutchesses.

Henry inherited the title in May 2022 after a career in script writing including 6 years in Hollywood. Seems appropriate that someone from a showbiz background should be the present incumbent.

The walk passed through the deer park on the outward and return legs with most of the walk in the surrounding countryside.

After striding through Graffridge wood we made our way cross country to Burleigh Farm, on the way meeting a young lady walking her dogs, who told us she had enjoyed the weekend's music in her house some 4 miles from the estate.

So, on through the edge of Newton Wood and back into the deer park where the security fencing, staging, temporary buildings, sound and light systems were being dismantled by heavy machinery and carted away by an army of large trucks.



Ignoring, and then us, this mayhem we walked up an avenue of trees leading to the house passing in the middle-distance the family mausoleum built by Lady Elizabeth (of the obelisk) for her parents and subsequent relations. At the time she probably didn't realise she was going to be one of the very first occupants.

The house has been described as an architectural gem by some and the opposite by others.



It is an undeniably striking and atmospheric Victorian Gothic building and has been used by films including Batman and The Crown amongst many others.

The original building was a red brick manor built around a central court in about 1490 by Sir Richard Lytton.

A quick gallop through history. Henry Tudor of Lancaster beat the Yorkists at Bosworth Field in the last and final Battle of the Roses. Richard III, the last Plantagenet, and the last monarch killed in battle, was slain (by having the back of his head chopped off). His body was hastily buried not to be recovered until 2012 under a car park in Leicester. He is now reinterred in Leicester Cathedral. The point of this is Sir Richard was treasurer to Henry Tudor after he was crowned as Henry VII (of the house of Tudor).

A couple more bits of interesting info.

Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens married into the family and remodelled most of the interiors of the house, particularly a fine Jacobean Hall.

The house was leased, in the early 20th century, to Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, the younger brother of Tsar Nicolas II who abdicated in 1917. Michael refused Nicolas's edict that he should succeed him as Tsar Michael II and cleared off to England. A smart move as all the remaining Romanovs in Russia were murdered in 1918.



So, after an enjoyable walk we returned to the pub, and joined by three non-walkers, we enjoyed a fine lunch together.

Report by Walk Leader - Richard Upton

27 July

Discussion Group

AI - Friend or Fiend?

Fourteen members convened at The Engineer PH to enjoy a wide-ranging discussion, led by Bryan Coventry, which attempted to determine the answer.

As a Friend: the application of AI can be positively utilised in nearly every sector including Industry, Finance, Commerce, Health Care and Education, thereby making our everyday lives a little easier.

As a Fiend: the greatest risk is that the technology becomes uncontrollable. Its application can also be used to the detriment of mankind in areas including Weaponisation (Cyber Warfare and Cyber Crime), Misinformation, the Erosion of Truth and Social Manipulation ('deep fakes', personal privacy), Job Displacement, Systems Malfunctions and Failures, increasing Corporate Influence (on Government policy, Central Banking, Global Stock Markets and the Election process) and a significant and increasing strain on Natural Resources.

Conclusion: the overwhelming consensus was that AI is both Friend and Fiend and its future will depend upon how humanity chooses to develop, interact and regulate the technology. If universal agreement can be reached and adhered to it will be a friend, but one that must be approached with curiosity and the utmost caution.

Report by Discussion Leader - Bryan Coventry

29 July

Drop in Café

On yet another warm and sunny day, Wednesday 29 July, a total of eight members dropped by from 10am onwards for coffee and lively chat at Rothamsted's on site cafeteria. Yet again there was a different mix of members. There isn't an agenda for these entirely informal sessions; we mainly talked about our own personal news and general "stuff", including the recent "Classics on the Common". It is by no means a rival to the Discussion Group!

The subject of a potential club holiday for 2027 came up (David Jump having stepped back from his informal and successful role as our holiday coordinator) and we discussed the relative merits of Malta and Sicily for a while, along with other potential destinations for a 5/6 day visit. Ideas would be referred on to the Visits committee.

Thinking ahead, we agreed that there was value in meeting in this way (this being the third such coffee morning) and so Wednesday 26 August (at 10am) would be advertised for our next Drop In Café.

Report by Chairman Paul Manuel

5 August

Prom Concert

In a happy lull between heatwaves, a group of 11 set off for London on a sunny Wednesday afternoon to enjoy a Prom concert at the Albert Hall.

The 1452 train to Blackfriars and the underground to South Kensington both ran smoothly and we were soon seated at a café (Filo Coffee) in Bute Street enjoying a leisurely teatime snack. The almond croissants are highly recommended!

Of our group, three hadn't experienced a Prom concert before, so that added to the sense of anticipation.



We ambled up Exhibition Road, resisting the ice cream vans, and arrived to find the hall filling up to capacity as the 6pm concert, to be given by the Hallé Orchestra, was a sell out.

Our seats in the stalls gave us a good view of the stage and we settled back to enjoy an orchestration of a short Ravel piano piece, *La Vallée des cloches*, Nadia Boulanger's *Fantasy for piano and orchestra* and, after the interval, Rachmaninov's second symphony.



The solo pianist for the Boulanger, Alexandra Dariescu, was making her Proms debut (in a very sparkly red dress) and was very warmly received. She gave an encore with the lead cellist of the orchestra.

The *Fantasy* had not been performed at a Prom concert before - so we had three Probus Proms debutants watching a Proms premiere, played by a Proms debutante pianist. A lot of firsts going on there.



With 5000 or so in the hall, there was a great festival atmosphere, huge applause - and appreciation of all it takes to bring a live concert together on this scale.

Rachmaninov's second symphony is described as being "lush", one of the last great romantic works, dating from 1905/6 before the arrival of Stravinsky and ever more angst ridden 20th century classical music. It runs for just about an hour and sweeps the listener along deploying all the forces of a large symphony orchestra. The slow movement is perhaps the most beautiful and worth seeking out for its own sake on the internet should you be interested.

The Hallé Orchestra under Kahchun Wong gave a mighty performance which I think everyone enjoyed.

Back to South Kensington and home in a trice - somehow the tube arrived promptly and, wonderfully, although the whistle had been sounded, the Thameslink train driver at Blackfriars beckoned us to hurriedly board as we scrambled along the platform instead of leaving us stranded.

I hope that we will be able to repeat a Proms outing next year. It was a lot of fun.

Report by Visit Organiser - Paul Manuel

6 August

Stowe Visit

Thirteen of us drove over to Buckingham, sharing cars, for a day out at Stowe.

We are lucky that the mansion, originally designed by Vanburgh (also famous for Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard), still stands - after the bankruptcy of the Duke of Buckingham in the mid 19th century it was nearly pulled down and was only ultimately rescued after the death of the last impoverished family member by being acquired to become the base for Stowe School in 1923.

In recent decades (since the 1990s) a Foundation Trust has been established specifically to conserve and restore the house, which had become in need of serious money and expertise. The school operates under the terms of a lease from the Trust.

We were welcomed with coffee and biscuits on the terrace overlooking the lake and then enjoyed a lively 90 minute tour of the palatial rooms, together with a history of the Temple family who first moved to Stowe in Tudor times, but who rose through judicious marriages together with military and political ability to the heights of wealth and power during the 18th and early 19th centuries. The Temples became knights, then barons, then earls, marquesses and finally dukes. They were supporters of George I (1714-1727), and Lord Cobham was the mentor (and then father in law) of William Pitt the Elder (Prime Minister 1756-58). His son Pitt the Younger and two other Grenville relatives were also prime ministers,

All this evaporated in 1847 when the 2nd Duke of Buckingham and Chandos was declared bankrupt owing the equivalent of £100 million in modern value. The entire contents of the house were sold. The work of the Foundation includes commissioning replicas of paintings, statuary and furniture which once filled the house



The state rooms are beautiful: a wonderful pillared and domed entrance hall, drawing rooms, dining rooms, library and music room - all lavishly decorated, often with considerable amounts of gold leaf!



We wondered how a school could function within a stately home setting, but somehow the school governors and Foundation Trust manage to thrive alongside each other. Old Stoics (as they are known) raise very considerable sums for the school and the National Lottery has provided large amounts for the house. (It is a condition of lottery funding that the House is opened to the public.)

As we were finishing our tour a large group of visiting sports teams at the summer school poured into the tapestry lined dining hall, which gave us a feel for how the curious mix of 18th century grandeur and lively teenagers functions during term time.

(The tapestries are in fact clever photographic reproductions printed as washable wallpaper - but they are huge and colourful. The originals are displayed in various museums across Europe).

After our tour we adjourned to the famous landscape gardens and parkland of 750 acres now owned by the National Trust. They were laid out by Bridgeman, Kent and, of course, "Capability" Brown. After a bite to eat in the café, we were at leisure to enjoy the huge site with its wooded valleys, lakes and classical follies. It would be perfectly possible to spend an entire day in the grounds, exploring both the landscape and the many curious buildings - temples, pillars, gothic mini mansions, and a special memorial to British Worthies, from King Alfred through to Shakespeare, Milton, Newton and Locke. (Who would we include today - and would we have to dump The Black Prince and Sir Francis Drake?)





We only had a few hours in the afternoon to explore, so we will have to return, perhaps after the autumn rains have refreshed the grass and foliage!

Stowe is just an hour or so from Harpenden and well worth a visit.

Report by Visit Organiser - Paul Manuel

13 August

Club AGM

As part of another successful AGM, Club Chairmanship was passed from Paul Manuel to Bryan Coventry.

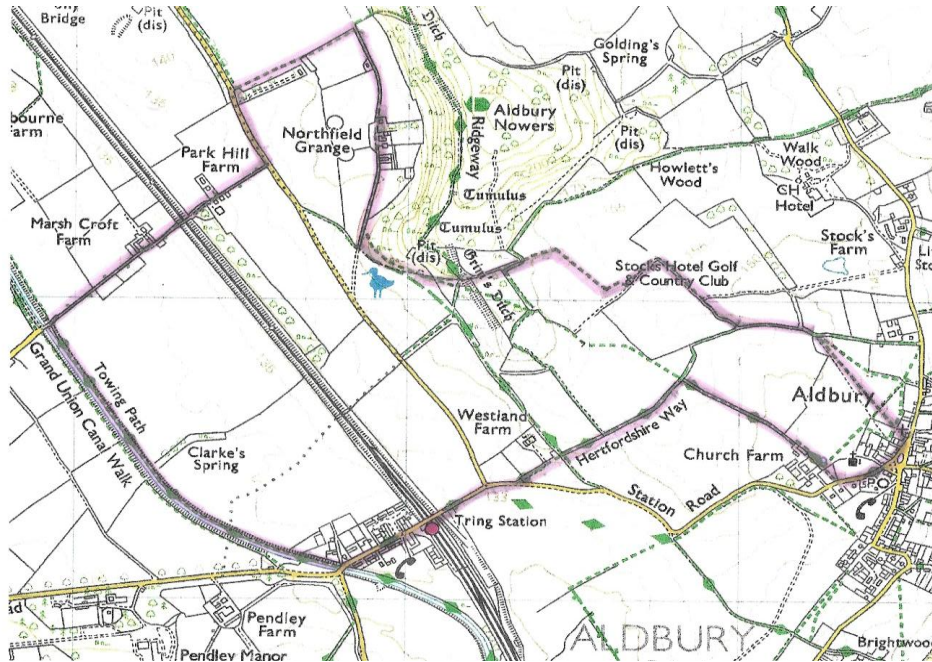


18 August

August Walk

Eleven members took part in this month's walk which started and finished at the Greyhound Pub in the picturesque little village of Aldbury which, in recent times, has become a favoured location for film and television companies.

We set off at 10:15am in decent walking weather (overcast skies and warm rather than hot) and followed the route outlined in the map below.



We left the village green with its duck pond and medieval stocks and walked past the St John the Baptist Church, crossed a field which boasted the presence of a "Beef Bull" (fortunately nowhere to be seen), turned left onto the Hertfordshire Way and descended to the road leading past Tring station and the former Royal Hotel and cottages.

When we reached bridge number 135 of the Grand Union Canal we took the tow path to the next bridge where we stopped for a group photo.



From this un-numbered Marshcroft Bridge we took the lane passing through Park Hill Farm and crossed the road to ascend part way towards Pitstone Hill. To avoid the steepest incline we turned right past Northfield Grange and up through Aldbury Nowers wood to reach the highest point on the Stocks Golf Club course where the view of the surrounding countryside was excellent and justified yet another group photo!



We descended through the golf course to a wooded lane leading into a field which led back to the Greyhound Pub where we enjoyed a good lunch and excellent company.



I have been asked to record that, for reasons undeclared, Alan Falconer broke with tradition and ordered Steak Pie rather than his usual Fish and Chips. Once the shock had subsided and his meal had arrived, those present agreed that Alan had made a wise choice. What will it be next month???

Report by Walk Leader - Sandy Bisland