

**Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 2
WW1 Trenches and Alpine Meadow**

Audio point 1 Kitchener's Field

- As you leave the railway station by way of the pedestrian subway at the Platform 4 exit, pause to glance across at the building to your immediate left. Now the Marlin Montessori School, it was built as the private waiting room for Lord Brownlow and his guests. At the outbreak of war in 1914 Lord Brownlow placed the building at the disposal of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps and it was used for the Quartermaster's office and stores throughout the war.
- It's even commemorated in a humorous army song of 1915:

“Near a well-known railway station
At the Quartermaster's store,
'Tis there I'd be parading
As I've often done before;
With the ton-weight marching order
And a rifle full of grime,
To be sloping arms and forming fours
And ever marking time.”

- With Berkhamsted Castle to your right (*if you wish to visit the castle please go directly to Audio point 2 Castle*), walk along Brownlow Road and, where the road bends right, keep straight ahead and go through the right hand gate at the entrance to the playing fields, home to Kitchener's Field Bowls Club and Berkhamsted School Sports Ground.
- These playing fields occupy land that was formerly known as The Park to distinguish it from Berkhamsted Common which begins further up the hill facing you. Where the tarmac gives way to footpath, continue ahead through the fields with the hedge to your left.
- In his memoir *The Inns of Court Officers Training Corps during the Great War* their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel E R L Errington, writes,

“The situation of our camp at Berkhamsted was ideal, pitched in the field on the north side of the station and sloping gently up to Berkhamsted Place...The proximity of the station did away with all transport difficulties. On the west side, we had ample room for expansion, and on the east side another large field, subsequently given the name of 'Kitchener's Field', made an admirable drill ground.”
- Errington recalls how the men were warmly welcomed in Berkhamsted and Northchurch. Many were billeted with local families, and “as soon as we moved into billets the Rector...placed the Court House [the sixteenth century parish rooms beside St Peter's Church] at our disposal for an Orderly Room...Through the

kindness of Lady Brownlow we were able to begin by using her hospital at Ashridge”.

- Did the local experience of the men of the Corps match the rosy view of their CO? It seems that, on the whole, it did, if the alternative memoir of training in Berkhamsted *The Devil's Own Time* is to be believed. (“The Devil's Own” was the nickname of the Corps.) This humorous account, written under the pseudonym “Rell & Abel”, emphasises the role, as the focus of social life, played by the YMCA. Churches and chapels across Berkhamsted made their halls and meeting rooms available for the YMCA to organise relaxation for the troops. The opening of a new, purpose built “YMCA recreation hut” in February 1915 on the cricket field in Lower Kings Road made the national press.
- “[The YMCA] was our place of recreation, reading, writing, refreshment, the indispensable and loved abode of our leisure moments. There were billiards and books, sweets and teacakes, pens and ink. A post office, boxing, concerts, a football field, and all things”.
- They summed up their experience, “...Berkhamsted, as compared with London, may have been slow, but it was the very vortex of life compared with Salisbury Plain”.

[Go to Audio point 3 Well Farm to the Inns of Court memorial]

Audio point 2 Castle

- Berkhamsted castle, a designated Scheduled Ancient Monument is owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, and managed by English Heritage. Admission is free and information panels in the Visitor Room tell the castle's story.
- The Visitor Room is open at Easter weekend and from the beginning of May to the end of September on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays from 10.00am to 6.00pm. At other times by arrangement (KShew9100@aol.com).
- The history of what you see today begins with Duke William of Normandy.
- After the defeat of Harold at the battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066, William marched with his army through southern England, pillaging as he went. Crossing the Thames at Wallingford, he reached Berkhamsted.
- Here he was met by Edgar Atheling (chosen King by the people of London after Harold's death), Archbishop Ealdred, the Bishops of Worcester and Hereford, Earls Eadwin and Morcar, and the chief men of London, who swore allegiance to him, and offered him the crown.
- William proceeded to London where he was crowned king on Christmas Day 1066.
- William granted the Manor and Honour of Berkhamsted to his half-brother Robert, Count of Mortain. who was mentioned in the Domesday Book entry for Berkhamsted, and who constructed a Motte and Bailey Castle (a type of castle

introduced by the Normans in the 11th century) on the site.

- Much of the surviving original Norman earthworks can still be seen, except for the outer sections which were destroyed when the railway and roads were made. The railway viaduct was built on the line of the outer moat as were the houses in Brownlow Road to the west of the castle later in 1930.
- Tower Hill (the motte) is the castle's most prominent feature, today as well as in its heyday. Local historian Percy Birtchnell comments: "As a reward for the climb there are splendid views, and if the broken walls seem small, the earthworks look impressively large. Not to wander round the moats is to miss the most interesting short walk in the district".
- Nowadays, the wildlife of the castle's natural setting is, perhaps, rather more interesting to modern eyes than its architecture.
- The inner moat is part damp with standing water in places. The vegetation at the bottom of the inner moat is of tall swamp including, notably, Flowering Rush.
- The outer moat is less damp and supports Common Nettle, Thistles and occasional aquatic vegetation; mature Beech trees have been planted around its side.
- There is Bugle on the grassy banks between the two western moats and abundant Hart's-tongue in the Keep Well. Early Purple Orchid was recorded in 1983.
- The pasture to the east of the Castle supports a good mix of wild flowers and there are some large Hornbeam standards on the southern boundary.

Audio point 3 Well Farm to the Inns of Court Memorial

- At a crossroads in the path turn right, passing the buildings of Well Farm to your left. This path leads directly to New Road. Just before the road turn left at a made-up path and follow it to a small car park at the top of the hill.
- Opposite the car park, across the road, is the Inns of Court Memorial.
- The inscription on the memorial reads,

"In memory of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps, who in this neighbourhood trained over twelve thousand men to serve as commissioned officers in the Great War 1914-1918, and in affectionate remembrance of the two thousand who gave their lives for their country, this monument is erected by members and friends of the corps.

Salus populi suprema lex"

The welfare of the people is the supreme law

- On the base of the plinth it is recorded that the ashes of Colonel Errington lie

nearby. He served the Corps for 36 years “and was its loved and honoured commander 1913-1916”.

- The Inns of Court OTC was originally part of the London Territorial Force and consisted mainly of men connected with the law courts, although as the war progressed, the search for recruits was considerably widened.
- For military training the location in this part of the Chilterns was ideal. Errington's memoir continues:

“The surrounding country was the best imaginable for training, being so varied...to the north lay the big common, later intersected by some 13,000 yards of trenches, then Ashridge Park, undulating and beautifully timbered, placed entirely at our disposal by Lord Brownlow, and so away to the open downland of the Chiltern Hills. To the south, hilly and enclosed land leading to Hawridge and Cholesbury Commons. To the east, farms and enclosures admirably adapted for night operations; and to the west, the private grounds of Rossway and Champneys, always open to us; with woods, farms and enclosures to and beyond Tring. We went where we liked, and did what we liked. The big landowner, the small landowner, and the farmer were all equally ready to help”.

- Of course, given that the Corps came to Berkhamsted in September 1914 and did not leave until June 1919, it was hardly to be expected that everything was so completely harmonious all of the time, but “if there was any trouble, Major Mead at once got on his horse, rode over, and smoothed things out...”
- Retrace your steps to the car park.

Audio point 4 The Trenches

- When the Ashridge Estate was sold in 1921, to meet death duties, 489 acres of the the eastern part of the Common was bought privately and presented to Berkhamsted Golf Club. The Trustees of the Club now manage the land having lodged a Deed of Declaration giving the public the right of air and exercise.
- To reach the trenches take the left hand path at the back of the car park.
- Passing a metal kissing gate on your right a few steps further bring you to a T junction. Turn right and follow a made-up footpath downhill to another T junction. Turn right again along another made-up path, this time going uphill, away from the road.
- Follow this path for about 400 yards as it joins a bridleway leading across the Common and, in 5 minutes or so, you will see the trenches, visible as an extensive earthwork complex, on your left. The site of this area of trenches was cleared of scrub and surveyed and mapped as part of the Chiltern Commons Project 2012-2014, but regrowth of bracken during the summer can obscure some of the detail. <http://www.chilternsociety.org.uk/commons-project.php>
- The mapping project is intended as a memorial to the officers who trained here

with completion planned in time for the centenary of the outbreak of war in 2014.

- The trenches you see today are only a fraction of the 13,000 yard (approximately 7½ miles) system mentioned in the Errington memoir. An information panel is planned for the site, but, in the meantime a sketch plan, available to download, explains the system you are looking at.
- The trenches are aligned along a north-south axis. They appear to be a set for generic (rather than mission specific) training. At the extreme northern end is a front line, complete with island traverses. Supporting the front line are a pair of communication trenches running in parallel towards the south. In the communication trench nearest the bridleway are three T-shaped excavations, which may be bombing pits, dugouts or even latrine areas.
- With a little imagination it is possible to recognise in this fragment what prompted the anonymous contributor to *The Devil's Own Time* to celebrate the achievement:
“We took infinite pride in those trenches. They were works of art. There were traverses, firing trenches, dug outs, bomb-proof shelters, loop holes, machine gun emplacements, and much more besides”.
- A verse from a song in a Christmas Review put on by officers of the Corps in 1915 says it all. To the tune of *Mandalay*,

“But that's all past and over
And clean gone from my head:
And there ain't no buses running
From Ypres to Berkhamsted.
And I'm learning in the trenches
What some have learned before,
That there are worse things that Fortune brings
Than the training fields of yore.”

- Graham Greene speaks of his “sporadic escapes” to the Common during his schooldays at Berkhamsted School, recalling how, “they turned at some point (I guess when I was eleven) into a better organized and a more prolonged truancy”.
“Runs' I enjoyed, for then I could be alone in the solitude of the countryside, and at this period of my life I loved the country. It was my natural escape route. On the wide stretches of Berkhamsted Common seamed with the abandoned trenches of the Inns of Court OTC among the gorse and heather, and in the Ashridge beech-woods beyond, I could dramatize my loneliness and feel I was one of John Buchan's heroes making his hidden way across the Scottish moors with every man's hand against him.”
- The powerful grip of this part of the Common on Greene's imagination is further illustrated by the use he made of it as part of the back story of Castle, the hero of his novel *The Human Factor*.

“When Castle was a child there still remained on the Common the remnants of old trenches dug in the heavy red clay during the first German war by

members of the Inns of Court OTC young lawyers who practised there before they went to die in Belgium or France as members of more orthodox units. It was unsafe to wander there without proper knowledge, since the old trenches had been dug several feet deep, modelled on the original trenches of the Old Contemptibles around Ypres, and a stranger risked a sudden fall and a broken leg. Children who had grown up with the knowledge of their whereabouts wandered freely until the memory began to fade. Castle for some reason had always remembered...”

Audio point 5 Berkhamsted Common and beyond

- Leaving the trenches behind, the route of the Audio Trail follows a clear and well-marked bridleway along the line of the ridge. At first, with a narrow line of trees to your right, screening the golf course, you can enjoy, to your left, wonderful views across open country towards the west.
- Carry straight on, following the marker posts with yellow painted tops (some helpfully marked 55, the official number of the right of way) for about a mile and a half (some 30 minutes or so). About half way along this stretch you will cross the entrance drive to Brick Kiln Cottage. (No prizes for guessing the former activity associated with it.)
- The western slopes of the Common were once more open but, over time, became enveloped in shrubs and trees. Since 2001 most of the slopes have been cut and arisings collected by an old style forage harvester. This has helped to keep the bracken and small trees at bay and some typical acid grassland species (for example, heather, gorse, sheep sorrel, pill sedge) are beginning to establish themselves. The area is the subject of a Higher Level Stewardship agreement between The Trustees of Berkhamsted Golf Club and Natural England.
- Local historian Percy Birtchnell notes that, before more recent generations began to value its possibilities for purely recreational purposes, the Common was put to strictly functional use.

“For centuries the Common was prized for the practical use that could be made of it. All common rights derived from the Lord of the Manor, whose tenants grazed cattle and sheep, and especially pigs in early times...Flocks of sheep were still to be seen on the Common in the early years of [the twentieth] century, but by that time few people still exercised rights to take gorse for fuel and fern for litter.”

- A little way further on you will find yourself with trees to both sides of you as you enter Ashridge Park, with, to quote Graham Greene once more, “the smooth olive skin of beech trees and last year’s quagmire of leaves, dark like old pennies”.
- Keep going in the same direction until the path intersects with one from your right. Make an acute left turn and follow this new, well defined, path across a narrow stretch of quite dense woodland to the wood’s edge. Go through the gate into a paddock and keep straight ahead, through fields, following the line of a hedge to your right, until you arrive at the entrance to Alpine Meadow (**Audio point 7 Alpine Meadow**).

Audio point 6 The Common - a historical digression

- The arrival of the military in 1914 was not the first time Berkhamsted Common had seen action.
- In 1860 the Manor of Berkhamsted was sold by the Duchy of Cornwall to Lord Brownlow. Taking advantage of the General Enclosure Act, in 1866 the new owner had fences erected to enclose an area of approximately one third of the Common. By way of compensation, he generously offered the people of the town an area of swampy land by the river to be used as a recreation ground.
- The effect of the enclosure was to prevent traffic passing along ancient tracks from east to west and to exclude people who had pastured sheep or exercised other common rights.
- Percy Birtchnell takes up the story again,

night job
the

“The action taken was prompt and immediate. A contractor recruited a private army, 120 strong, at Southwark for what he described as 'a at Tring', and a special train was chartered to leave Euston station at midnight...Moonlight helped the night raiders and they completed destruction of the fences in about four hours.”

- A contemporary newspaper report says that, “in carriages, gigs, dog-carts and on foot, gentry, shopkeepers, husbandmen, women and children at once tested the quality of what they saw by strolling over and squatting on the Common and taking away morsels of gorse to prove, as they said, the place 'was their own again’”.
- His Lordship didn't take matters lying down, and legal proceedings dragged on for some three years after the destruction of the fences. The Court finally found in favour of the townsfolk. A right of common pasture for all sorts of cattle...was declared to exist, as was the right to cut furze, gorse, fern and underwood for fodder and litter. Rather curiously, to modern eyes, the judge refrained from upholding 'the right of recreation' on the Common.
- Nevertheless, the people of Berkhamsted continued to roam over the Common, as they have done ever since.
- A detailed and hugely entertaining account of the Common confrontation can be found in “Beechcombings” by Richard Mabey, Chatto & Windus, London, 2007.

Audio point 7 Alpine Meadow

- Alpine Meadow is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust works with the landowner, the National Trust, on its management.

- There is much of interest to see all year round, but the chalk grassland is particularly rich in wildflowers and butterflies from Spring to Autumn.
- In Spring primroses flourish around the woodland edge, and, later on, mouse-ear, hawkweed, fairy flax and common spotted orchids can be seen.
- The warm sloping grassland attracts many insects in Summer, including the marbled white butterfly which is uncommon in Hertfordshire. Autumn butterflies include brimstone, comma and speckled wood. Search the bramble areas that border the grassland as butterflies often bask in these sheltered spots.
- The species rich grassland is maintained by being cut and raked by the Wildlife Trust twice a year. This helps to remove the build up of nutrients in the soil which could eventually lead to more dominant plant species taking over. The tree line on the southern side is gradually being pushed back to encourage more grassland.
- Log piles around the Meadow have been created to provide basking spots for lizards which are abundant at the reserve. Early mornings with bright sunshine are the best times to search for them as they emerge to bask and warm up before dispersing to feed. Once the cold weather arrives they hibernate.
- During the Winter months the focus of interest shifts particularly to the woodland to the south of the Meadow which supports birds such as green woodpeckers, finches and goldcrests, which can be seen busily feeding.
*[Alpine Meadow text courtesy of Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust
www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk]*

Audio point 8 The final leg

- Beyond the meadow, follow the path through two wooden kissing gates and across a small wood which forms a continuation of the Nature Reserve. Pass through a metal kissing gate at the exit to the nature reserve, turn right and go uphill with a hedgerow on your right.
- As the path levels out, continue straight ahead through a metal kissing gate still keeping the hedgerow on your right.
- At the next field boundary the gate has been removed, since the fields are no longer used for keeping livestock. You will see a marker post with 3 direction options. Bear right. You can now enjoy a view across a vast expanse of open fields. As an autumn treat, if you are lucky, you might spot large feeding flocks of redwings and fieldfares. At all seasons of the year the skyscape is really spectacular.
- Ahead a view of south Berkhamsted opens up in the distance with, on the skyline, a prominent Water Tower looking like a castle turret.
- Just beyond the next field boundary (no gate) you pass a fenced-in pond on your left.

- At the field's end go through a wooden kissing gate and you will find yourself at a place where 4 paths meet. Turn left following a signpost reading “Public Footpath 25 Castle Hill $\frac{2}{3}$ ”, and pass through another wooden kissing gate into a footpath with hedges on both sides.
- There are occasional glimpses to your right of Bridgewater School and its playing fields. The site hides ancient history. Four 1st century shaft furnaces and four late Iron Age cremation burials were found in the 1970s when the school was being built.
- At the end of the enclosed section go through a metal gate and continue in the same direction along the field's edge with the hedgerow to your right. Ignore a footpath leading off to the right, part way across the field. At the end of the field go through a metal gate on to a metalled drive passing Castle Hill Farm Cottage on your right. Bear right into Castle Hill. Look out for a wide tree-lined urban footpath with gardens and houses on both sides and bear right again along this path.
- This footpath finally emerges into Castle Hill Avenue. Turn left, and at the end of the avenue, turn left again into Bridgewater Road which brings you back to your starting point at Berkhamsted railway station.