

NATURE TRAIL THROUGH LITTLEHEATH WOODS

Before You Arrive:

Please be aware that this is woodland area not a park and, as such, the paths have no hard surface material rendering them very muddy in some places from late Autumn to Spring. Ensure you wear appropriate footwear. From early summer the bramble is very fast growing and can reach out into the paths. You may wish to ensure that your legs are covered.

The paths meander up and down hill and are quite steep in places. Tree stumps and roots render most of the paths inaccessible for mobility scooters.

Overview:

Littleheath Woods covers 61 acres but the Nature Trail is concentrated in the centre area. Depending on the season, as you walk the paths the Speckled Wood butterfly* may dance for you and at woodland edges the Gatekeeper butterfly* appears. You could spot foxes and grey squirrels. Deer appear sporadically for periods of time and then disappear again.

There are now large numbers of Ring Necked Parakeets in the woods and you will certainly hear their raucous squawking. Their presence is giving concern that they are out competing our native birds for food and, in the case of woodpeckers, nesting sites.

IF YOU ARE VISITING IN:

Early Spring - You may see the first butterfly of the year to emerge, the bright yellow Brimstone*. Very occasionally you may see a Red Admiral* that has overwintered here. The first tree to blossom is the Cherry and soon after that the shrubby Blackthorn will flower. In late Spring the woodland is full of our beautiful native Bluebells. Fortunately, the larger, paler and unscented Spanish variety has not taken hold here.

Summer – The best time for spotting butterflies and wildflowers in the fields.

Autumn – Many types of fungi can be found, appearing and disappearing in a matter of days. Fungi are always present but only emerge above ground when it is time to release their spores. There are so many different fungi that, if you have a special interest, you should bring an identification book with you. Some of the easiest to spot are King Alfreds' Cakes (round & black), Candle Snuff (masses of tiny white filaments which, if you warm them with your breath and brush them gently they give off what looks like smoke), Bracket Fungus (looking like large plates wrapped around tree stems) and Jelly Ears (brownish, ribbed and wobbly).

Through late Autumn and Winter the coppery coloured leaves you see still clinging onto branches are Beech.

Winter – look out for flocks of redwings which are winter visitors and look similar to our native Song Thrush.

The Trail:

This is a circular walk lasting 1½ to 2 hours depending on how fast you walk and how often you stop and The Trail covers everything you could see and hear throughout the year. What you actually find will depend on the time of year you visit.

In addition to these Nature Trail Guide pages there are butterfly and wildflower identification lists which you may like to print out and take with you. This symbol * in the text denotes there is an illustration available on one of these sheets. There is also a link to download a tree identification app.

You can join at either Foxearth Rd entrance, **Point 1**, (next to house number 47) or Queenhill Steps entrance, **Point 5**, (at the junction of Queenhill and Littleheath Roads). If you are joining at Queenhill Steps, please turn to **Point 5** in the text.

Enter the woods from Foxearth Rd, Point 1, and go straight ahead. On the right of the Permissive Bridleway Post as you go uphill there is a large Crab Apple tree. In the autumn when the fruit falls this area smells positively alcoholic! Growing on the left is a large clump of raspberry canes. There are several areas of both raspberries and redcurrants in the woods and, although they do bear some fruit, they don't get enough light to ripen properly. It is likely that all these have arrived in the woods courtesy of our feathered friends.

As you get to the top of the slope you reach a crossroads, **Point 2**, with another Permissive Bridleway post on the right, alongside which is a particularly good patch of Enchanters' Nightshade* flowering in early summer.

Turn Left at this crossroads

Along this path on both sides is mainly Hazel with a few Field Maples. On the right you will soon pass Keyhole Pond. It is really two ponds but, in times of prolonged rainfall, they join in the middle, hence the name. Usually however they remain separated by a narrow strip in front of which is Hazel and Holly and just past these is a large patch of wild rose. Its pale flowers appear between May & August followed by red hips in the autumn. This pond, in common with the other two within the woodland, is rainwater fed and will often dry out in the summer months but not before it is host to a mass of frogs' spawn in early spring followed by tadpoles as long as water remains in it long enough. The lance shaped leaves in the pond belong to the Yellow Iris which unfortunately rarely flowers due to low light levels.

Opposite the pond is an area mostly planted with Hazel under Oaks. Beneath the Hazel, Bluebells appear in April/May followed by the tiny white flowers of Cleavers in the summer. The latter is the commonest variety of the Bedstraw Family sometimes called Goose Grass or Sticky Willy and most will know it from the little round green fruits which stick to clothing and pets! Also along this path, in spring, are the bright yellow flowers of the ground hugging Lesser Celandine*. And in Spring & early Summer a good show of the pink flowering Herb Robert* which is a member of the Cranesbill family. You can tell from the leaves that it is closely related to the garden variety geraniums.

As you reach the end of this path, **Point 3**, opposite is a large patch of Alexanders*. This tall, yellow flowered member of the umbellifer family flowers late Spring/early Summer and is common in coastal areas but rarely found inland. Despite this, there are several patches within Littleheath Woods.

Turn Right and keep right.

Take care along this path at first as the twisted web of tree roots make interesting pattern but can be hazardous under foot. In April & May both sides of this path are a frothy white blanket of another member of the Umbellifer Family – Cow Parsley or, as we prefer - Queens Anne's Lace*.

At the 1st Small Path on the Left, 4.

Pause and, in Spring, the right hand side of the path straight ahead is covered in the white starry flowers of the Wood Anemone*. Now follow this small path on the left as it curves along the backs of the houses (Littleheath Rd). Again, beware of the tangle of roots underfoot. On the right is an area of mixed planting established in 2010. This has been very slow growing due to the dense canopy overhead. Along the left of this path you may unfortunately notice garden waste dumped by the houses that back on to it. This is a constant problem as the woodland area is bounded on all sides by houses and generally people don't realise the damage that can be done to the ecosystem of a woodland by dumping garden (and sometimes building) waste.

At the end of this Path is a junction, 5. To your left is the Queenhill Steps Entrance.

Turn Right.

If you are starting the walk from here, walk straight ahead.

Almost immediately you will see on the left an Ash tree with 4 trunks. This tree was clearly cut down when small and grew back up multi stemmed. It's impossible to know whether it was deliberately coppiced (more about coppicing later) or cut down because it was in the way *but ancient folklore has it that passing a sick child between the trunks would aid recovery.*

Along both sides this path is dense bramble. Much of the ground in Littleheath Woods is covered in bramble and, being extremely invasive, it smothers bluebells and other wildflowers as well as newly planted saplings and coppice stools. It does however provide cover and homes for many of the woodland fauna such as mice and shrews, and long tailed tits will build nests in the taller patches. The flowers provide nectar for butterflies and bees. The blackberries in Autumn are a good food source for birds as well as the mice and shrews. Unfortunately there are no hedgehogs in the woods as there is a large population of badgers here and the two species don't cohabit. Despite the benefits to wildlife, the bramble does need to be carefully managed to attain a balance in woodland flora.

About halfway way along the path on the right and about a metre in from the path there is the tall Red Campion* which can flower continuously from Spring to Autumn although the flowers are actually dark pink rather than red.

At the end of the path is a staggered junction, 6. Go straight on.

Further along this path you will arrive at a seat which is opposite one of two areas in the woods in which disease resistant Elms were planted in 2014. Elm trees, once a quintessential part of the English countryside, were virtually wiped out in late 1960s and 1970s by Dutch Elm disease; it's estimated that over 25 million trees in this country alone fell prey to the disease. This experimental reintroduction has been planted in memory of Paul Shaw who was a well known and prominent member of the Selsdon community for many years until his sudden death in 2012 and has been funded by a generous donation from his family.

In mid/late summer behind the Elm area there are Rowan Trees heavy with berries. Slightly to the right of the Elm area is a large ash tree behind which is a dead standing tree. It is important to leave such trees in place as they provide a home not only for all sorts of insects but for the woodpeckers too.

You may hear the Greater Spotted Woodpecker drumming at any time during your walk through the woods as well the Green Woodpecker's distinctive call which sounds like laughter. In Springtime and Summer listen out for birds such as robin, great tit, nuthatch and blackbird. The tiny wren has a powerful tune as does the song thrush. Summer brings visitors such as blackcap and chiff-chaff whose song gives his name. Crows and jays make a raucous sound and may signify the presence of a bird of prey such as sparrow hawk or kestrel.

Moving on, at the crossroads, 2, turn left.

As you walk along this path, on the right immediately behind a holly is a specimen of the Norwegian Maple which is one of very few in the woods. As the name suggests, it's not native to this country and is easily mistaken for a sycamore but is slower growing and not at all invasive. Also on the right, in late spring, is a sea of bluebells.

At the end of this path you come to another staggered junction, 7, and opposite are areas of Hazel coppicing. Coppicing is an historical method of managing trees as a crop which can be harvested on a regular cycle. The tree is cut down to the base of the trunk, creating a "stool" from which multiple stems or "poles" grow, this is done every 5-9 years depending on the thickness of the stems required. In the past much of the rural economy was based on coppicing, the product being used for building, fencing, fuel, furniture and tools to name but a few. Most of our native broadleaved (deciduous) trees can be managed in this way but the most commonly used is Hazel. It is thought that, coppiced correctly and regularly, a Hazel tree can live indefinitely.

These days, there is very limited demand for coppiced products but the Friends do produce bundles of stakes, bean poles and binders both for our own use and for use by local residents in exchange for a small donation. A more important consequence is the benefit to flora and fauna of opening up the woodland floor regularly. When the regrowth is still small, numerous patches of primroses* may be seen here in early spring.

Turn left at this staggered junction.

Immediately on your left, before you start going downhill, is a large area of bramble, bindweed & nettles. Although the nettle is not very popular with us because of its sting, it is vitally important to several varieties of butterfly which lay their eggs there and, once hatched, nettle leaves are the food source for the caterpillars. Growing amongst these nettles is the Hedge Wound plant with its purple flower spikes and nettle-like leaves.

A little further on is the Green (or Old) Pond. The ring of mature trees at the back and uphill denote the original edges of the pond which was filled in by the Council just after the war following a drowning. This has been partially excavated now and attempts have been made to make it leak proof, unfortunately to no avail and it is empty in dry months.

Still within local living memory the nettle swathe previously mentioned and uphill of the pond was a grassy area where locals would picnic and play cricket. A Hawthorn hedge has been planted around the pond as it is now, to make it safe with the thought that, sometime in the future, the picnic area may be restored.

Continuing downhill there are masses of raspberry and redcurrant canes on the left. On the right the path is edged with Enchanters' Nightshade and bindweed. As you progress, the hazel coppice block on the right gives way to an area of Ash regeneration with Alder trees planted between the two areas. Alder particularly like the damp conditions found at the bottom of the hazel coppice slope. *In times past country folk often lined the insides of their boots with fresh Alder leaves to sooth aching and burning feet.*

Near to the path on the right a series of Wild Service trees have been planted and thrived for 9 years. These are related to the rowan and whitebeam family and have attractive creamy white flowers, brown berries and good autumn colour. Although native, they are now uncommon and unfortunately seem particularly attractive to squirrels who have now stripped the bark from many, either killing them or effectively destroying them as trees. We are attempting to

save them by protecting the trunk with plastic tube as far up as is possible but those that survive are unlikely to attain their proper tree form.

You will reach a seat on the left of the path and, continuing downhill, on the right is the area of young ash trees. These are self seeded and have been thinned out several times in order to allow the best specimens to grow well. The fear of complete devastation due to Chalara Ash Die Back has receded a little, due to evidence that some of the Ash trees in this country are more resistant to the disease than their continental cousins. It is likely that we will still lose a large number but hopefully we will be spared the mass destruction once predicted. *In folklore, one of the methods of removing warts was to prick each wart with a new pin which was then pushed into the bark of an Ash tree with the accompanying chant "Ashen tree, Ashen tree, Pray buy these warts off me".* You will come to a seat on the right, exactly opposite this on the left is a Larch tree. The Larch has needles, like a Christmas Tree, rather than leaves but is still deciduous and its distinctive trunk is a pink-brown colour with scaly-topped ridges.

At the bottom of the slope, 8, turn left into the Field.

Clears Croft is the smaller of two fields within the boundaries of Littleheath Woods and was apparently cultivated for potato growing during the Second World War. The view from the top of the field shows how high Selsdon is, looking south-west out over Purley & Banstead - a wonderful spot to view a summer sunset with thoughtfully provided benches and tables on both sides. Behind you at the top of the field is Blackthorn, a native shrubby, spiny plant best known for its small black fruits known as sloes which are used to make sloe gin. Unfortunately, being largely in the shade, these clumps don't fruit well.

Follow the left hand side of the field downhill towards the 6 fruit trees planted near the bottom , Site 9.

Just before you reach these, between June & September you may be able to find several clumps of the bright orange Fox & Cubs* (*Pilosella aurantiaca*). This member of the daisy family is also known as orange hawkweed and is extremely attractive to pollinating bees and butterflies as a valuable nectar source.

The trees in this mini orchard are Damson, Greengage, Victoria Plum, 2 Apple (eating & cooking) and Quince. If you are visiting the woods in Autumn, you are welcome to sample any fruits there may be. At the very bottom of the field to slightly to the right of the orchard is a huge Privet. This is commonly used as hedging and rarely allowed to attain this size. In early summer it's a mass of small white flowers, followed by berries in the Autumn.

Walk along the bottom of the field past an exit (Littleheath Rd/Brent Rd junction)

In the far corner, **Site 10**, is a mixed planting, particularly showcasing two of our 5 evergreen native trees – Juniper and Box (the other 3 being Yew, Holly and Scots Pine) The juniper is the only member of the cypresses family with berries which are actually formed by the fusion of fleshy cone scales. Both male and female plants are required for the female to produce the fruits which are best known for flavouring gin - you will usually see both green and black (unripe and ripe) berries at the same time. Behind the junipers are two box plants which are most familiar as a widely cultivated garden hedging plant especially popular for topiary. Box is rarely seen at its full height of 12 metres and its wood is so dense that it will sink in water. Its leaves were once used as a substitute for quinine as a fever reducer.

Walk back up the field, keeping to the left.

On your left the field edged with gorse* which produces bright yellow flowers at any time of the year. *Folklore has it that gorse, when planted by the front door would prevent entry to witches.* It is also a plant of remembrance. You will also notice many molehills in the grass of this field as well as the larger field you will visit later.

At the top of the field there is another table and seat and just beyond these, Point 11, take the path on the left going uphill

As you leave the field on both sides are patches of wood sage* (no relation to the culinary variety). This is not a particularly appealing plant but it is relatively uncommon. In Spring the right hand corner is a mass of small, delicate white flowers belonging to the Great Stitchwort*. The Lesser Stitchwort is much smaller and flowers prolifically during the summer in the larger (Fallen Oak) field.

As you near the top of this uphill path, there is an area on the left which is one of the 5 sites of "Continuous Cover Forestry" that has been created within the woods. This is a process whereby small areas of woodland are opened up by felling very old and failing trees. The resulting gap in the canopy then allows for natural regeneration and/or planting of saplings which then form the "next generation" of woodland trees. This type of forestry is particularly important in areas of woodland where the canopy trees are all of a similar age, thus presenting the danger of them all failing at the same time and eradicating the woodland. You can take a short diversion by finding the small path on the

left which bisects the planted area, **Site 11a**. Both sides are a mixed planting of Oak, Cherry & Hazel with some naturally regenerated Birch and Whitebeam. The latter can easily be identified by the white, downy appearance of the underside of the leaves. It is said that the local area of Whyteleafe was named for the large number of Whitebeam that originally grew there.

On a hot day this area is a sun trap and is alive with butterflies, especially Meadow Browns*, Gatekeepers*, Ringlets* and Commas*. A White Admiral* has also been seen here, this butterfly favours clearings in woodlands and lays its eggs on honeysuckle which you will notice growing through the bramble and up many of the trees once you **Return to the main path**.

Continuing up the path you are surrounded by Oak trees and on the right is a gravel pit. This excavation was initiated during a period when this was part of a larger woodland used for hunting and the pebbly material utilised to improve the pathways. At the top of this path is a glade of oaks over Blackheath pebbles devoid of undergrowth. Other trees here are misshapen and bent and to the right you will see exposed gnarled tree roots.

Go straight across the glade and take the wide downhill path slightly to the right.

On this path you are again surrounded by Oak trees.

When you reach a crossroads, 12, turn right onto the Vanguard Way

The Vanguard Way is a long distance walk of around 66 miles (106 km) from East Croydon to Newhaven on the south coast. The walk was developed in celebration of the 15th anniversary in 1980 of the Vanguard's Rambling Club, who named themselves after an occasion when they returned from a walk travelling in the guard's van of a crowded train. It crosses Littleheath Woods from Croham Valley Rd to the Addington Rd

The right hand side of this path is a sea of Bluebells in late Spring. As you progress sharply downhill, you are advised to walk carefully as this part of the Vanguard Way is excessively muddy in wet periods, along some of the way you will be able to stay on higher ground to the left. Also on the left is a large area of Sweet Chestnut. You will notice some are multi stemmed, indicating they have been coppiced in the past. Chestnut is a very hard wood and resists decay almost as well as oak. For this reason it has always been popular for posts and fencing. All the benches in the woods have been constructed by the Friends from fallen Chestnut trees.

At the crossroads, Point 13, at the very bottom of this path turn left into Fallen Oak Field.

Walk directly ahead part way along the path mown through the grassland, then turn around to face the way you have just come.

In front of you, rising up on the right along the field edge towards the Pylon, are two seats and the field edge is planted with a mixture of traditional hedgerow plants - Hawthorn, Hazel and Guelder Rose. The latter large shrub is most obvious in Autumn with its brilliant red leaves and berries but isn't a rose at all, it is in fact a Viburnum (opulus). Further along the edge towards the pylon in the summer you will see large clumps of Rose Bay Willow Herb. This tall, spikey pink flowered plant has grown in number from a scarce to a ubiquitous plant. This expansion occurred as a result of the two World Wars clearing huge areas of forest and the burning of the ground in both town and countryside - just the right conditions for this plant to thrive and giving rise to one of its common names in the south: 'Bombweed'.

The Sweet Chestnut trees along this edge are particularly good fruiters. There are many Sweet Chestnut trees in the woods which can provide generous hauls of edible chestnuts for culinary uses. These are distinct from conkers which come from the Horse Chestnut tree which tends to be happier in more open situations than woodlands provide and so there are few of these in Littleheath Woods.

Along the field edge on your left, partially hidden in summer by another patch of Rose Bay Willow Herb, is a "Laid Hedge". Hedge laying is a country skill that has been practised for centuries and is achieved by partially cutting through a saplings' main growing stem and bending it over almost horizontally then binding it in place. Any tree suitable for coppicing can be used – Hazel, Chestnut, Willow, Ash and largely, in this particular case, Hawthorn. Although a well-laid hedge looks beautiful, the original aim was to create a barrier to stop sheep, cattle and other live stock from straying. Once it has thickened, it has the added bonus of being very beneficial to wildlife providing shelter and nesting sites.

On your right in the field itself is a circle of wood which looks like the trunks of felled trees. In fact they are sections of fallen trees that have been sunk into the ground and are popular with groups such as scouts and guides.

The field has neutral to acid soil and therefore does not support the wide variety of wild flowers found in chalk grassland. Nevertheless in late spring and summer there is still plenty to be found. If you have the time to explore you will find, hugging the ground, the bright yellow pea-like flowers of Birds Foot Trefoil* and Meadow Vetchling as well as the dainty white stars of the Lesser Stitchwort. Also present are other plants typical of acid grassland such as Heath Bedstraw, Common Catsear*, Mouse-eared Hawkweed and Tormentil. Taller are clumps of the cheerful, yellow flowered St John's Wort* (Hypericum), cultivated varieties of which are popular garden plants. The very tall white flowers, reminiscent of cow parsley, are in fact Hogweed* the sap of which can be an irritant. Look closely at the flower and you are likely to see at least one Red Soldier Beetle which find this plant particularly attractive. Unfortunately Hogweed is very invasive and has to be controlled to prevent it from crowding out all the other wildflowers. Mid to late summer the purple, thistle like flowers of numerous clumps of Black Knapweed* can be seen; these are very popular with the Common Blue butterfly*. The most prevalent butterfly in the field is the Meadow Brown*, though the less common Marbled White*, Essex Skipper* and Small Copper* can also be seen in the height of summer.

Turn around and make your way to the cluster of silver birches and gorse, Site 14, on the high point (still in sight of the path by which you entered the field).

There are several more sunken trunks here from which you can rest in the shade to survey this part of field. In the Autumn examine the grass in this area very carefully and you may be lucky enough to find the most iconic of toadstools – the Fly Agaric (red with white spots) which is commonly found where birch trees grow.

Cross to the nearest field edge and, turning left, walk to the seat, 15.

Here, if you look back past the Birch stand and over the roofs of the houses below, you will see the church tower of Royal Russell School.

Continue walking along the field edge away from your field entry point until you find another seat, 16.

About 15m into the field from here a large patch of Greater Yellow Rattle* appears in early summer. This wild flower is useful for controlling the grass as it is semi parasitic on the roots. Also in this patch several clumps of the lovely Devils Bit Scabious* can be found in late summer.

Continue to walk along the field edge for about 25 metres from this seat (ignoring the wide path) and you will find a gap in the field edge between the trees, 17, and a narrow path.

This path takes you to the Cattle Pond, another rain fed area of water. Looking up to the horizon you will see a concrete water tower through the trees.

The numerous clumps of Irises in the pond rarely flower due to low light levels. In the summer you are likely to see dragonflies and damselflies (smaller) skimming the water and circling the pond in search of their prey - mostly midges and mosquitos.

Walk to the large oak on the right of the pond and take the path going sharply uphill on the right.

Continue on this path, and, when you reach a crossroads with an oak tree in the middle, go straight on. Keep following this uphill path until you reach a T junction, 18, which is the Vanguard Way. Uphill, to your left, you will see a marker post but you need to turn right and go downhill.

As you follow this path downhill you will see a large patch of Rhododendrons on the left. This is one of two patches in the woods and, although not native, are popular with local residents. The Friends keep them strictly under control to prevent them spreading.

Eventually you will come to a finger post on the left which mentions, amongst others, the London Loop which passes through the woods. The London Outer Orbital Path — more commonly called "The London Loop" — is a 240-kilometre (150 mi) signed walk along public footpaths, and through parks, woods and fields around the edge of Outer London, described as "the M25 for walkers".

On your right is Fallen Oak Field and on your left, just past the finger post, is another area of "Continuous Cover" forestry which has been planted with Cherry, Wild Service, Oak, Hazel, Field Maple & Small Leaved Lime together with some Guelder Rose at the edge.

Continuing on this path edged with more Enchanters Nightshade, you will be able to see more closely the laid hedge mentioned earlier.

At the end of this path you reach the junction, 13, by which you first entered Fallen Oak Field. Turn Left.

This wide path or “ride” takes you gently uphill. In Springtime the bank on your right is a dazzling succession of Wood Anemone (white starry flowers), Bluebell and (at the front) Yellow Archangel*.

Carry on straight up this ride. Shortly before the top there is a Yew on the left edging out into the path, 19. Take the small path, left, immediately after it.

On the right is small open area or glade. The grass in this glade is cut periodically and the hazels are coppiced regularly to prevent them creating too much shade. Native, butterfly friendly wildflowers are gradually being introduced as well as Buddleia bushes which, although not native, are so attractive to butterflies that they have been given special permission to be in this one part of the woodland. The bramble surrounding the glade is woven to form a hedge, the bramble flowers also being a good source of nectar. A good variety of butterflies have been attracted to this open area, amongst them Silver Washed Fritillaries*, Peacocks*, Red Admirals*, Commas* and Small Coppers* to name but a few.

Continue along the narrow path that runs past the glade and gradually winds uphill.

Take care at the start of this path – in the early summer months the bramble is rampant and quickly reaches out into the path with its sharp thorns.

The top of this path brings you out into the lovely Beech Glade, **Site 20**. This area is extensively used by Forest Schools and you will notice evidence of their activities. See our website for more information about Elmhurst Schools' adventures.

The Beech trees are around 150 years old - pause to stand under one of the magnificent veteran trees and look up. In the springtime especially enjoy the dark outline of the branches against the lime green of the new leaves and commit it to memory because once these lovely trees die (and all like them) there will be no more. The beech tree is the grey squirrels absolute favourite to predate upon. Once the tree reaches about 20ft tall the squirrel will nibble out the growing tip and strip the bark. The tree may not die but it will effectively become a shrub rather than a canopy tree. The squirrel will attack many trees in this way and are considered one of the greatest threats to the future of our woodlands.

Walk straight across the glade and find the narrow downhill path in the left hand corner. When you reach the bottom of this path, 21, turn right.

As you carry straight on this long path, which starts to wind uphill after a while, you will see a number of Yew Trees. These are another of our native evergreen trees and are one of the longest lived of all trees, some found in cemeteries pre date the 10th century. Yew trees have long been associated with churchyards but it's not clear why. It has been suggested that yew trees were planted on the graves of plague victims to protect and purify the dead, but also that graveyards were inaccessible to cows, which would die if they ate the leaves. The leaves are toxic as are the seeds contained within its red berries. However, birds that feed on the berries cleverly seem to be able to leave the seeds undigested and so are not harmed.

Yew trees were used as symbols of immortality, but also seen as omens of doom. For many centuries it was the custom for yew branches to be carried on Palm Sunday and at funerals. In Ireland it was said that the yew was ‘the coffin of the vine’, as wine barrels were made of yew staves. They are quite fast growing and their spread has to be controlled as does the other evergreen native which is prevalent in this area of the woods – Holly.

Wherever a holly branch touches the ground it roots and creates another plant. Very soon an ever expanding “thicket” is created. This has some benefits for wildlife as cover and to keep the ground beneath snow and frost free. Holly branches have long been used to decorate homes in winter. The tree was seen as a fertility symbol and a charm against witches, goblins and the devil. It was thought to be unlucky to cut down a holly tree, however, they do have to be controlled to prevent them overwhelming the woodland.

As you reach the very top of this path, at a T junction, 22, you will see a seat opposite

On the left is a badger sett, one of many in Littleheath Woods. This is a large sett and all the bare earth humps are evidence of holes dug over many years. Main setts can be hundreds of years old and have several entrances. If you carefully examine any soft earth at the entrance to one of the holes you should see their pawprints. Badgers are mainly nocturnal and are related to weasel, polecat, pine marten and otter – they are all in the Mustelidae family. They are regular visitors to most of the gardens that border Littleheath Woods. They don't hibernate but are less active in winter and can live to 7 or 8 years old.

On your right is a small area of Elderberry trees with Box bushes to the front. The fruit and flowers of this understory tree can be used to make wine and cordials. There are many elder trees within the woods unfortunately, without regular maintenance, they have a tendency to fall over.

Turn right at this T junction

As you walk along this path with the Foxearth Road houses to your left, you will notice a number of trees with ivy growing up the trunk. Ivy presents woodland management with a dilemma. Contrary to popular belief, Ivy itself does little damage to the tree it climbs and it is very important to wildlife. The nectar, pollen and berries of Ivy are an essential food source for insects and birds during autumn and winter when food is scarce. When the growth thickens up it provides shelter for insects, birds, bats and other small mammals. The high fat content of the berries is a nutritious food resource for birds and they are eaten by a range of species including thrushes, blackcaps, woodpigeons and blackbirds.

The problem with Ivy occurs when it reaches the top of the tree trunk and spreads into the tree canopy. This has the effect of making it quite wind resistant and will cause the tree to uproot and fall in high winds. For this reason, once ivy does reach the canopy, the Friends cut sections out of the lower growth so that everything above that point will die off, thus protecting the tree but allowing the ivy to begin its ascent once again.

It was once believed that wearing a wreath of ivy leaves around the head prevented one from getting drunk!

It was also regarded as the emblem of fidelity; priests would present a wreath of ivy to newly married couples. Today it is still the custom for bridal bouquets to contain a sprig of ivy.

Continue along this path and you will reach the Foxearth Rd entrance you came in by, **Point 1, thus completing your circular route.**

If you started at Queenhill Steps, follow the first part of the walk from **Point 1 which will take you back to your starting point, **Point 5**.**

