

Hidden landscapes of Blackbird Leys – circular walk

Discover the ancient natural landscape of Blackbird Leys through its place-names and old field-names

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This walk uses place-names and field-names to reconstruct the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval landscapes of Blackbird Leys, introducing you to the earliest named inhabitants of the area. The walk is about 3km long, taking about an hour and starting near the Sandy Lane West bus stop on Blackbird Leys Road.

Blackbird Leys was originally part of the township of Littlemore, which extended from the Thames in the west to the eastern edge of Blackbird Leys; it bordered the parishes of Iffley and Cowley to the north, and Sandford to the south. From the Middle Ages until Enclosure in 1819 there were five great open fields that made up the arable fields of Littlemore – where crops were grown. These open fields were divided into sections called furlongs and people would have had their land in separate strips distributed in various furlongs around Littlemore. This walk looks at the old names of these fields and furlongs, as well as the names of meadows, pastures, springs and streams, helping you see Blackbird Leys through the eyes of its past inhabitants.

Sources

Peter Finn and Katie Hambrook, 'Place-names and the Anglo-Saxon landscape of East Oxford' in Griffiths, D and Harrison, J. (eds) *The Archaeology of East Oxford: Archeox, the Story of a Community*, Thames Valley Landscapes Monograph Series 43, Oxford, 2020.

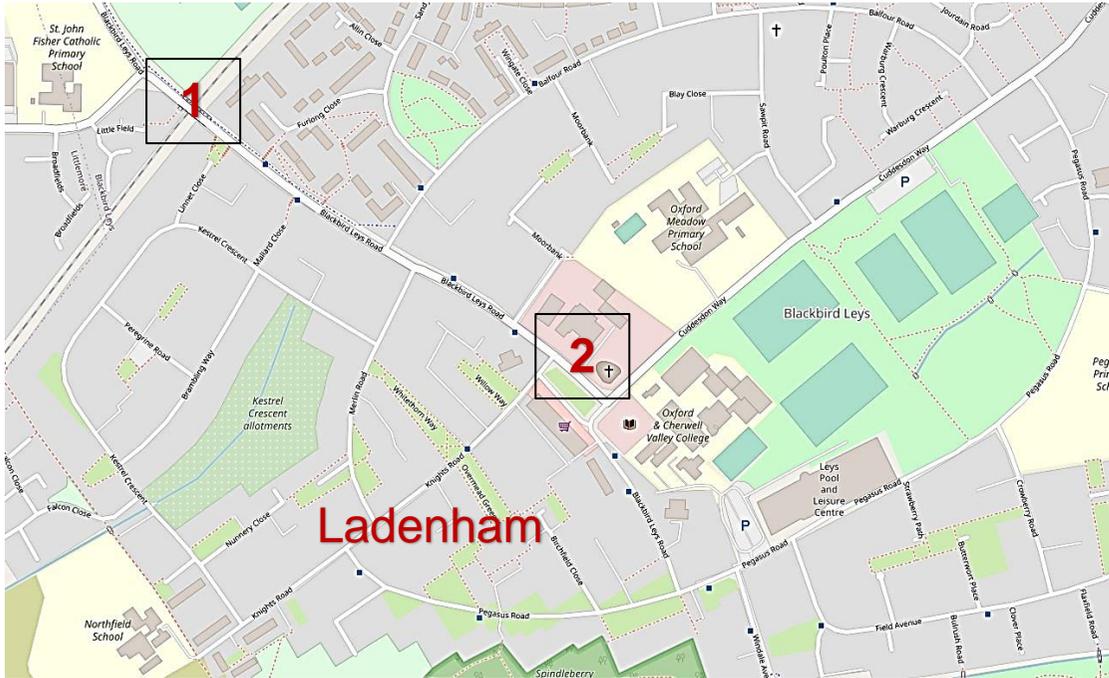
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1. Blackbird Leys Road, railway bridge, near the junction with Sandy Lane West.

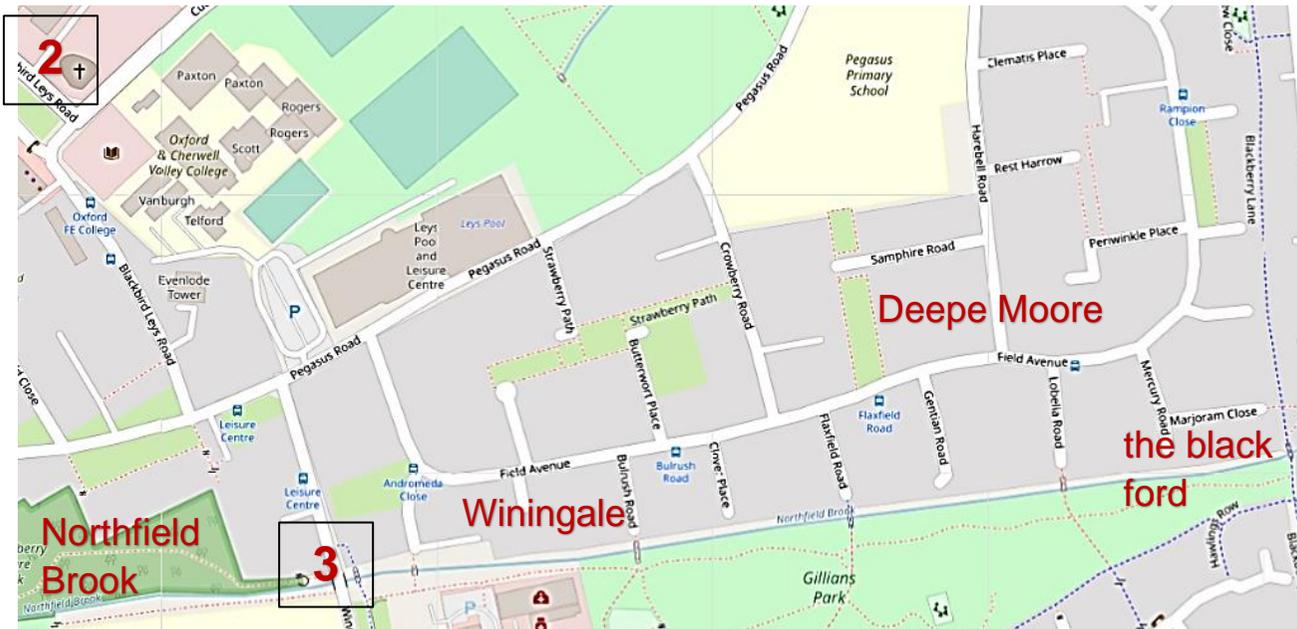
On either side of the bridge, looking north, you overlook what used to be Broad Field – a very broad open field that stretched from the Cowley Road on the west to the Roman road at the eastern edge of Blackbird Leys. What is distinctive about the furlong names in Broad Field is that they are full of the wrong sort of vegetation: Ferny Furlong, Scrubb Furlong and Fursson Furlong (furlongs with lots of ferns, brushwood and gorse). These may be 17th century field-names – or they could go back to a time in the Middle Ages when perhaps most of Broad Field was scrubland, used for grazing livestock, rather than arable fields.

Imagine the landscape first as scrubby pasture, with sheep and cattle grazing - and then think of it turned into arable fields, divided up into narrow strips.





2. Blackbird Leys Road – by the church.
 You've been walking through another open field, called Ladenham; part of Ladenham coincided with the oval area of Blackbird Leys within Balfour Road and Pegasus Road. I don't know what the 'Laden' part of the name comes from – I suspect it relates to an Anglo-Saxon name of a man who perhaps was an early owner of this area. There are two possibilities for the 'ham' part of the name. Sometimes 'ham' in a place-name comes from the Old English word *hām*, which meant a settlement or homestead (our word 'home' comes from the same word). In a field-name like this, it is perhaps more likely to be a different Old English word *hamm* – which here would mean 'raised land partly enclosed by streams' – and later in the walk you'll see how brooks form the western and southern borders of Ladenham.



3. Windle Avenue, by the Northfield Brook.
 From here you can look across the brook to what is now Greater Leys and was previously part of the parish of Sandford. Blackbird Leys was originally the name of a farm in Sandford just across the bridge. The Leys part of the name means pasture or meadow. Earlier forms of the Blackbird bit of the name show that it was originally Blackford and it probably referred to a ford where the Roman road crossed the brook (black because the soil of the brook there was dark). When a bridge was built there, people started calling it Blackbridge. The meadows and the farm here were sometimes called Blackford Leys and sometimes Blackbridge Leys – and then in the 19th century it became Blackbird Leys Farm.

You're at the Northfield Brook, named after a field in Garsington. And this a good place to think about the importance of rivers and streams in this area – the Thames, the Littlemore Brook, the Northfield Brook, as well as a lot of minor springs and streams. This meant that there were marshy areas that weren't much good for growing crops but could be good for pasturing livestock. In Old English this sort of land was called a *mōr* – so in the name Littlemore, *mōr* is not a moor like Dartmoor, but the 'little marsh'. The 'Little' of Littlemore may contrast marshland near the Thames with an area called Deepe Moore over on the south east, between the Roman Road and the Northfield Brook. Or 'Little' may contrast Littlemore with a larger area of marshland in Sandford to the south. Some of the areas by the brooks were good for use as meadows for growing hay as fodder to feed livestock over the winter. A meadow near here was called Winingale (later known as Windale): 'Wine's water meadow'. Wine was a really common Anglo-Saxon name and the Old English word *halh* was used for land by water or in a marsh.

As you go along the brook, imagine a line of marshy meadows alongside the water.

Go along the path through Spindleberry Nature Park, past the pond, across the bridge to Fry's Hill Park, along the path on the south side of the brook, back across the bridge near the Kassam Stadium.

4. Northfield Brook, on the path by the bridge.

Further to the west is where Northfield Brook joins another brook and becomes Littlemore Brook. Ladenham sits within the angle made by the junction of these two streams (which fits with 'ham' coming from *hamm*, 'raised land partly enclosed by streams').

The lower land immediately next to the junction of the two brooks was known as Redmoor – the marsh full of reeds.



There are older names for the Littlemore Brook: in an Anglo-Saxon document, a charter dating to 1050, it is called the *lacu* of Sandford. *Lacu* was an Old English word for a small stream. Another name for the brook was Lidginge Well; 'well' here means stream, but I don't know what Lidginge means.



Go along the path by Northfield School to the foot bridge near Falcon Close.

5. Path to Spring Lane, by foot bridge.

From here this path runs along the border of two open arable fields. To the east, there is Little Field – which is very little. To the west, there is Lake Field; Lake is from *lacu*, probably referring to a stream that ran down the western border of the field. The stream here is the Littlemore Brook.

Near the play area was a spring called Choswell. ‘Well’ in this case means ‘spring’ and ‘Chos’ comes from the Old English word *ceald* which means ‘cold’ – a very common name for springs.

Continue up the path to the railway crossing. Cross the railway line carefully and go up Spring Lane.

6. Spring Lane, at the junction with Sandy Lane.

Sandy Lane here marks the boundary between the southern Lake and Little Fields, and the northern Broad Field that you looked at earlier. The furlongs at this end have typical Broad Field names: Upper and Lower Briar Furlong – more fields infested with weeds. But they also have much more ancient names.

The Hockmore of Hockmore Furlong occurs in an Anglo-Saxon charter of 1004 – Hockmore marks the boundary between Cowley and Littlemore. In this case the ‘more’ probably comes from an Old English word *mære* – meaning ‘boundary’. ‘Hock’ may come from an Anglo-Saxon man’s name – and it’s possible that the same name is preserved in other local names. Hawkwell in Iffley (as in the Hawkwell House Hotel) may have been ‘Hocc’s spring’, and there was a Hockley near the Lye Valley. The name of Piple Furlong in Littlemore (and there was another Piple Furlong nearby in Cowley) comes from Pyppa’s *hlāw*, the burial mound of an Anglo-Saxon man called Pyppa. This may be a very old name, as Anglo-Saxon burial mounds are mostly from before 750. I suspect the mound was next to where the Littlemore Road becomes the Cowley Road.

You are now a short walk away from the starting point at the railway bridge on Blackbird Leys Road.

