

History and natural history

The 87 hectares of the reserve slope southwards from the edge of the Stanmore Hill ridge in the north. The lower part is London clay but as one climbs north the clay is overlaid by the pebbly Claygate beds with a cap of quaternary gravels on the ridge. This rapidly draining soil supports heathland vegetation where gorse thrives. When water trickling down through the gravel reaches the clay a number of springs emerge and form streams.

The name Bentley is thought to derive from the Anglo-Saxon words *beonet*, a place covered in coarse grass, and *leah*, a piece of cleared ground on the uplands. These words imply open space and traditional grassland, which remain a feature of the reserve today. A monastic settlement occupied the site in the 13th century, but was demolished. Bentley Priory house was the home of the Dowager Queen Adelaide in the 1850s.

The reserve is a patchwork of woods and open grassland within which lie two bodies of water, Summerhouse Lake (named for Queen Adelaide's lakeside gazebo) and Boot Pond. Heriot's Wood is ancient, that is, it has certainly been a wood since 1600 and probably ever since the last glaciers retreated. Many of the trees here are hornbeam, a species that is characteristic of ancient woods. To the west of Summerhouse Lake stands the "Master", a mighty oak at least 500 years old.

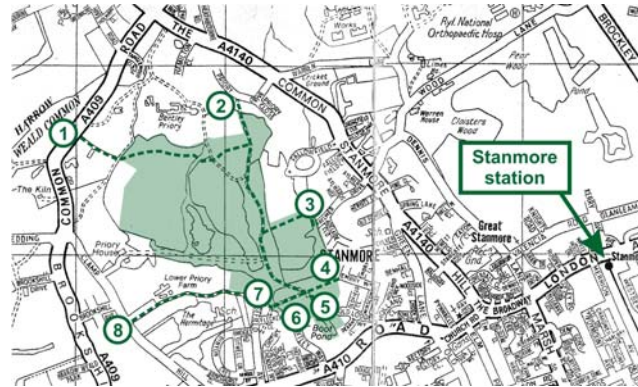
The open grassland is "unimproved", meaning that it has never been treated with fertilizer and hence, paradoxically, is rich in wild flowers. It has been designated a site of special scientific interest (S.S.S.I.) by English Nature. The dominant grasses are common bent-grass, red fescue and yorkshire fog. Wild flowers include uncommon species such as greater burnet saxifrage, great burnet, spotted orchid, betony, devil's-bit scabious and harebell, plus sanicle in the woods. A herd of cows grazes the grassland in summer to maintain the pastures and promote the diversity of wild flowers.

Many interesting and relatively uncommon birds can be seen or heard including buzzard, spotted flycatcher and bullfinch. In summer warblers such as whitethroat, garden warbler, blackcap, chiffchaff and willow warbler can be heard. These breed in the scrubland in Spring

Meadow and are rarely seen in the mature woodland. In winter, large numbers of redpoll, siskin, redwing, fieldfare and goldcrest arrive from mainland Europe and Scandinavia.

To the east lies a private fenced park which has a small herd of fallow deer.

How to find the reserve



The map indicates gates into the reserve:

- 1: 5-bar gate on Common Road
- 2: Gate on Priory Drive
- 3: Aylmer Drive
- 4: Embry Way
- 5: Old Lodge Way
- 6: Bentley Way
- 7: Masefield Avenue
- 8: Track then path beside Lower Priory Farm

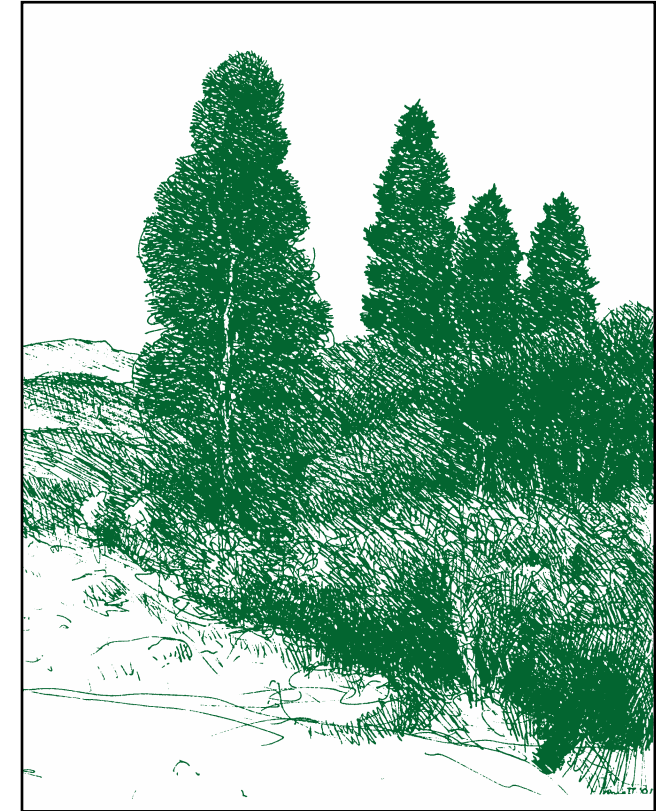
Buses 340 and H12 run along the A410 Uxbridge Road/Church Road, 258 along Brookshill/Common Road, and 142 along The Common/Stanmore Hill

From Stanmore Station (Jubilee line) walk or take the 340 bus to the junction with Old Lodge Way.

By car: The reserve has no dedicated car park. Limited kerbside parking is available in Old Lodge Way. An alternative if you would like a longer walk is to use the car park in Old Redding and follow the Bentley Priory Circular Walk (see over) through Harrow Weald Common to point 1 and the Weald Gate into the reserve.

Bentley Priory Nature Reserve

Find out more about your local nature reserve



Sketch by Peter Peretti

Leaflet produced by Harrow Nature Conservation Forum July 2007

Bentley Priory is one of the best known open spaces in Harrow. Originally one space comprising the house and grounds of Bentley Priory, a stately mansion built in 1775 with the distinguished and unorthodox Sir John Soane as architect, the two were separated when the house was occupied by the RAF and used as an operation centre during the Battle of Britain in the Second World War. With the sale of the house and its immediate grounds to a developer there are hopes that parts of the house will become open to the public.

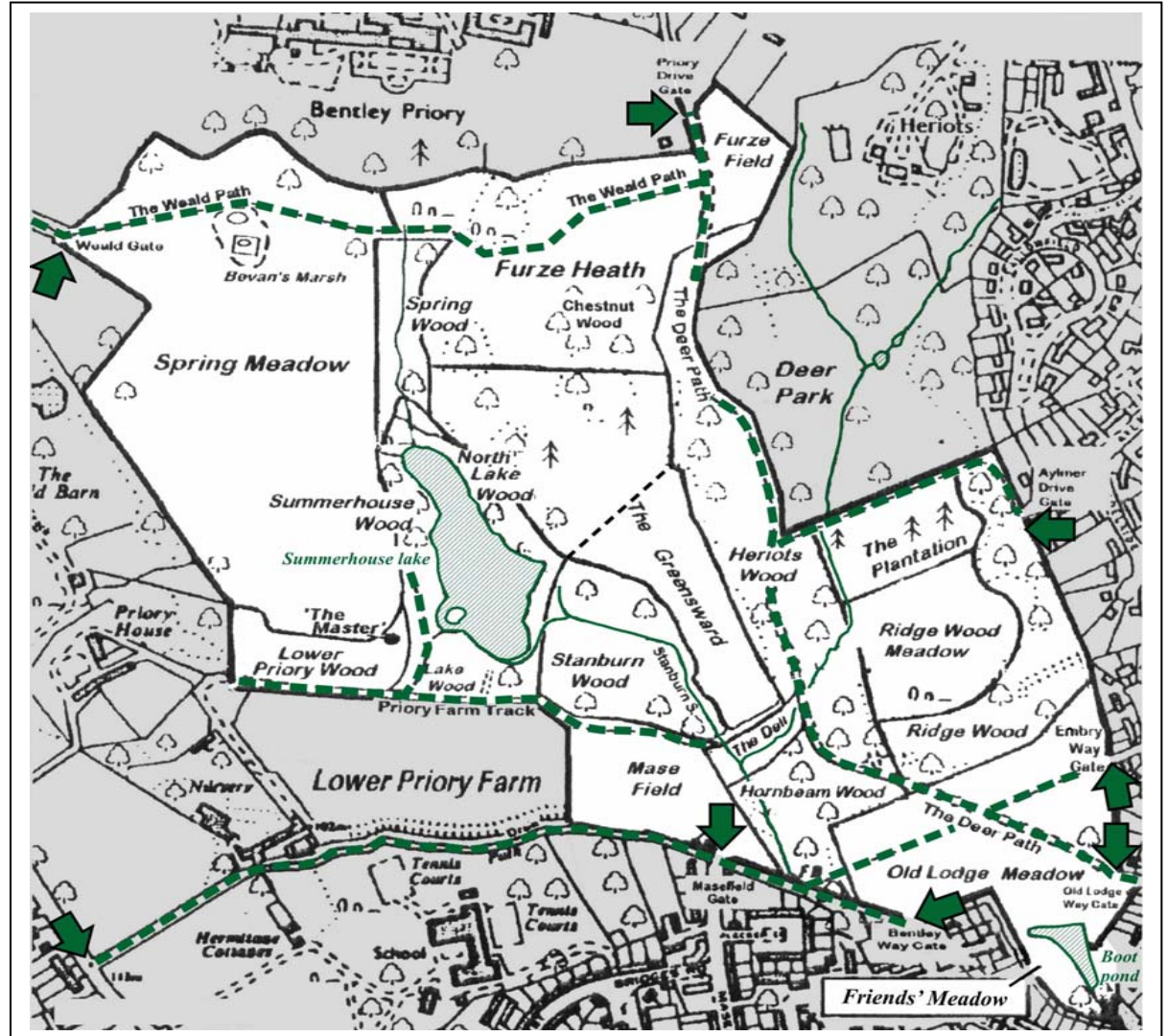
The land south of Bentley Priory house now forms the nature reserve. It is open all year round and welcomes all visitors, human and wild. All types of visitors will find something to interest them here. Two hard surfaced paths are suitable for strollers and outdoor wheelchairs: the Deer Path, which runs north from Old Lodge way gate to Priory Drive gate, and the Weald Path that runs west to Weald gate. These paths form part of the Bentley Priory Circular Walk, a guide leaflet for which can be obtained from Harrow Council Tourist Office, by post from the Harrow Nature Conservation Forum, or downloaded as a PDF from the Harrow Nature Conservation Forum website. The grassy spaces and open glades adjacent to these paths afford many possibilities for picnics and sunbathing, while more adventurous visitors will see many uncommon plants and animals in the quieter areas. All that we ask of visitors is that you treat the site with respect – that includes not dropping litter, not picking flowers, not lighting fires, not damaging trees or fences, and keeping dogs under control.

Maintenance

The reserve is looked after by a voluntary team of wardens overseen by a management committee. Day to day maintenance is carried out by volunteers. Constant work is necessary to maintain the complex mix of habitats: we must cut back scrub that would otherwise encroach on the grass, and remove trees that would otherwise overwhelm the scrub. Only by maintaining the mix of vegetation will the reserve remain attractive to so many birds and invertebrates. Larger scale work, such as pond dredging when necessary, is performed by council contractors.



Plan of the reserve. Arrows indicate access points.



Bentley Priory Nature Reserve needs volunteers. If you would like to help, whether at one of our working parties or as part of the warden team, contact the chief warden or Harrow Nature Conservation Forum.

Contacts:

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