

Graveley and Weston Archaeological Walk



The Wagon and Horses, Graveley

The walk begins at the Wagon and Horses pub (number 1 on the map), which is a sixteenth-century timber-framed coaching house with a fine original fireplace and an equally fine selection of beers. From the entrance turn left into the High Street and in 30 metres cross the road at the three-bay early 18th-century house called the Grange and into Church Lane.

Continue along the bending Church Lane for 200 m.

Pass Graveley Bury Farm on the right, which has an important series of barns dating to the seventeenth century (with nineteenth-century additions), and turn left onto a small lane signposted for the Hertfordshire Way. St Mary's Church is now before you (2). This is a fine example of a medieval flint church, common in Hertfordshire, and it is usually left unlocked for visitors. The chancel has good Early English style lancet windows of the thirteenth-century with a Perpendicular fifteenth-century window inserted on its south side – later heavily restored in the nineteenth century. There is a very impressive thirteenth-century arched double piscina to the S of the altar, which was used for the disposal of holy water after mass. It seems to have been copied from the piscina in Jesus College chapel, Cambridge. The west tower is also thirteenth or early fourteenth century while the nave windows date from the fifteenth century, in the Perpendicular style. The north aisle was added in 1887. There is an interesting nineteenth-century grave slab on the south side of the chancel laid down for the three wives of the Rev Thomas Fordham Green, and a fine epitaph urn and obelisk monument to Margaret Sparhauke dated 1770.



Double piscina, St Mary's church, Graveley

Coming out of the church back to the south gate of the graveyard you should stop to admire the seventeenth-century Graveley Hall Farm with dovecote to the W of the church. This is on the site of a manor house founded after the Dissolution of the monasteries on a site formerly owned by Sopwell nunnery in St Albans. A survey of the fields to the west and north-west in 1987 has shown what might be the remains of the medieval manorial complex. Graveley village itself grew up on the course of the Roman road from Baldock, and despite some signs of shrinkage in the later Middle Ages, would have been located here since at least Anglo-Saxon times. The location of the church and manorial complex almost 500 m away suggests that the manor house was always sited here, at a discrete distance from the village, and that the church was originally a proprietorial chapel (for the private use of the lord). From the seventh to at least the tenth centuries, ecclesiastical districts consisted of large areas of the countryside known as *parochiae*. These became broken down during the later Anglo-Saxon period into the smaller areas that we recognise as parishes. When this happened it was often the proprietorial chapels that developed into parish churches. By the time that the village was recorded as *Gravelai* in Domesday Book (1086), St Mary's was almost certainly its parish church.

Coming out of the church gate turn left onto a gravel trackway with the south wall of the graveyard to your left. After 30 m you arrive at a fork in the track (2) at which you should take the right hand fork. This takes you onto a bridleway that climbs about 50 m onto a ridge that is split at its apex by the parish boundary of Graveley and Weston. This well marked path will lead you all the way to Weston village with lovely views over the North Hertfordshire countryside to the north-west and south-east. The course of the Roman road to Baldock can be traced to the west on the opposite side of the vale, marked by a hedgerow that borders a golf course and a caravan park with the A1 motorway further in the distance. Keep on the easy to follow track as it bends right and left and goes under some small electricity lines.

You are now almost at the highest part of the ridge and should take the opportunity to look back from where you have come to the south, where Lister hospital and the northern edges of Stevenage can be seen. Between you and Stevenage are the remnants of a countryside of enclosed fields, with some hedgerows delineating sixteenth-century field systems. However, the late twentieth century has taken its toll on the earlier landscape of this part of Hertfordshire and most of what you see are the large open fields needed for modern agro-business. At the top of the ridge the path turns sharply to the right between two hedgerows, then levels out towards a wooden gate. At the wooden gate you continue left following the white arrow and yellow circle on a post, which directs you to the left of a small modern conifer plantation.

Continue along the track, now marked by occasional large trees to the left and right, until you reach the south corner of a small deciduous wood known as How Wood. At the corner of How Wood leave the bridleway for a while and take the small, but clear, path into the wood. This skirts about 10 m along the edge of the wood and serves as a contrast to the open landscape you have been passing through. In early April, the wood is carpeted in bluebells. To the right of this path is a wood bank that could well be medieval in date. In the medieval period woodland was often surrounded by ditches and banks, partly for estate management purposes, but also in order to clearly demarcate land ownership and land use. When you reach the north-eastern corner of How Wood, a track meets you from the left, but you turn right out of the wood back onto the bridleway and turn left.

After about 50 m you reach a fork in the path marked by a hedgerow that runs on the course of the parish boundary between Graveley and Weston (3). Take the right fork and continue along the straight path heading for a gap in the hedgerows about 200 m ahead. The southern houses of Weston village are now visible to the east. Go through a small wooden gate and continue straight ahead with a hedgerow to your right. Go through a metal gate and head through the middle of a pasture field aiming to the left of the garden of the Cricketers pub.

After passing through a metal gate you will be on the tarmac drive of Rowan Close, at the end of which (20 m), you turn left onto the road into Weston (4), unless you are tempted to make a short detour to the Cricketers in the other direction. This road leads past a nineteenth-century non-conformist chapel to the right and onto a grass triangle at the Red Lion pub. Follow the road signposted to Clothall and Baldock with the pub on your right. Take time to notice the fine eighteenth-century brick chimneys on the pub. Soon after the pub turn right onto Maiden Street, which is signposted for the parish church (there is a general store in the road opposite in case you feel the need for non-alcoholic refreshment). Follow this road that mixes solid nineteenth-century houses with not so solid 1960s architecture until it bends round to the right, past Mill Lane on the left and Munts Meadow on the right. At School Lane turn right (with a primary school to your right), marked as a public footpath, and carry along the tarmac drive until a concrete pillar marks the beginning of a dirt path. After about 50 m along this path you reach an ex-almshouse on your left with a plaque stating that two married couples or four widows from Weston parish were to live here, chosen 'from those who most frequent the church' and that they were to be over fifty years of age.

Carry along this well marked path until it comes out from under the shade of trees by Cow Mead house, and continue through the kissing gate of Holy Trinity parish church, Weston (5). This has a Norman crossing dated to the early twelfth century with a tower sitting on top, of which the lower portion is of the same date. The upper part of the tower was rebuilt in 1867. The piers and arches in the crossing are extremely good examples of the Norman style with complex capitals. The nave is fifteenth century in the Perpendicular style with its ceiling beams resting on interestingly grotesque corbels. The chancel was rebuilt in 1840 by Thomas Smith in the Norman style. There is also a late fourteenth-century font with quatrefoil panels. Just inside the east gate of the graveyard you will find two small stones about 4m apart reputedly marking the grave of Jack O'Legs. He was a fourteenth-century brigand who would rob travellers on the Great North Road (probably giving his name to Jack's Hill, north of Graveley) before repairing to his cave in the woods that then covered the Weston Hills. When finally caught and taken to the gibbet on Jack's Hill he was allowed one last request – which was to fire his bow and to be buried where the arrow fell. It hit the tower of Weston church and landed inside the east gate.



Holy Trinity Church, Weston

Go back to the kissing gate where you entered the churchyard, but don't go back through it, rather turn left following a yellow arrow on a wooden post. Follow the sunken path through a wooden gate and carry along the path (ignoring a stile to the left and kissing gate to the right) for about 70 m until you reach a kissing gate on your left marked 'Hertfordshire Way'. Head along a path through the middle of a pasture towards woodland in a dip of the land. Go through a wooden kissing gate into the wood. Stay on the path out of the wood noticing quarry pits to the woodland now on your left. You are now in the Weston estate, where evidence for occupation dates back to the Neolithic period – there have been finds of prehistoric earthworks, flint scatters and pottery from all around the woods to your left and the fields to your right, suggesting that the land to the south-east of Weston village has been settled since as early as c 4000 BC.

You head towards the left of Park Lodge through a large metal field gate, then cross the tarmac lane and carry straight onto a path that in 30 m leads you to a wooden kissing gate. The path is poorly marked here, but if you head diagonally to the left through the middle of the pasture, heading for the SW corner of woodland in front of you (6), then you will eventually after 100 m reach a metal kissing gate in the corner of the pasture field. Passing onto a tarmac drive you turn right and through a metal field gate (or stile by its side). Here you leave the Hertfordshire Way going off to the left and head south-west along the straight tarmac driveway for 200 m until you reach the small country lane that is Weston Road. Cross the road and take the path directly opposite marked as public footpath to Graveley.

This well marked track should now be followed for about 800 m until it reaches Manor Farm. For the first 500 m you will have large open fields to your left and a hedgerow to your right, which still allows for fine views to the north-west. In the corner of the field you reach a wooden gate – go through this and bear slightly to the left into open ground between two woods. After 50 m, you are following the track along the side of Harbourclose Wood uphill with views of the outward course of

this walk to the north-west. Go over a stile by a metal gate and continue along the track until you reach a road with Chesfield Manor Farm (now an equestrian centre) to your left

The farmhouse itself is mostly late eighteenth century, but there are remnants of the original seventeenth-century manor house, most especially the moulded oak mullioned window on the ground floor of the west range. The house is most probably on the site of the original medieval manor house of the deserted village of Chesfield. Like many other villages in Western Europe, the population of Chesfield fell victim to the ravages of the Black Death in the mid fourteenth century and the village simply never recovered.

If you turn left at the road (7), walk for 100 m, turn left again onto a tarmac drive and walk for a further 70 m you will see the ruins of St Etheldreda's church, viewable from the roadside. This church was in existence by 1216, but what you see is an early fourteenth-century single cell chancel, nave and SE chapel. The church was dismantled and deconsecrated in 1750 and is now on English Heritage's register of 'Buildings at Risk'. If you look over the other side of the road you will see a large quarry pit, most likely the source of flint for both church and manor house.



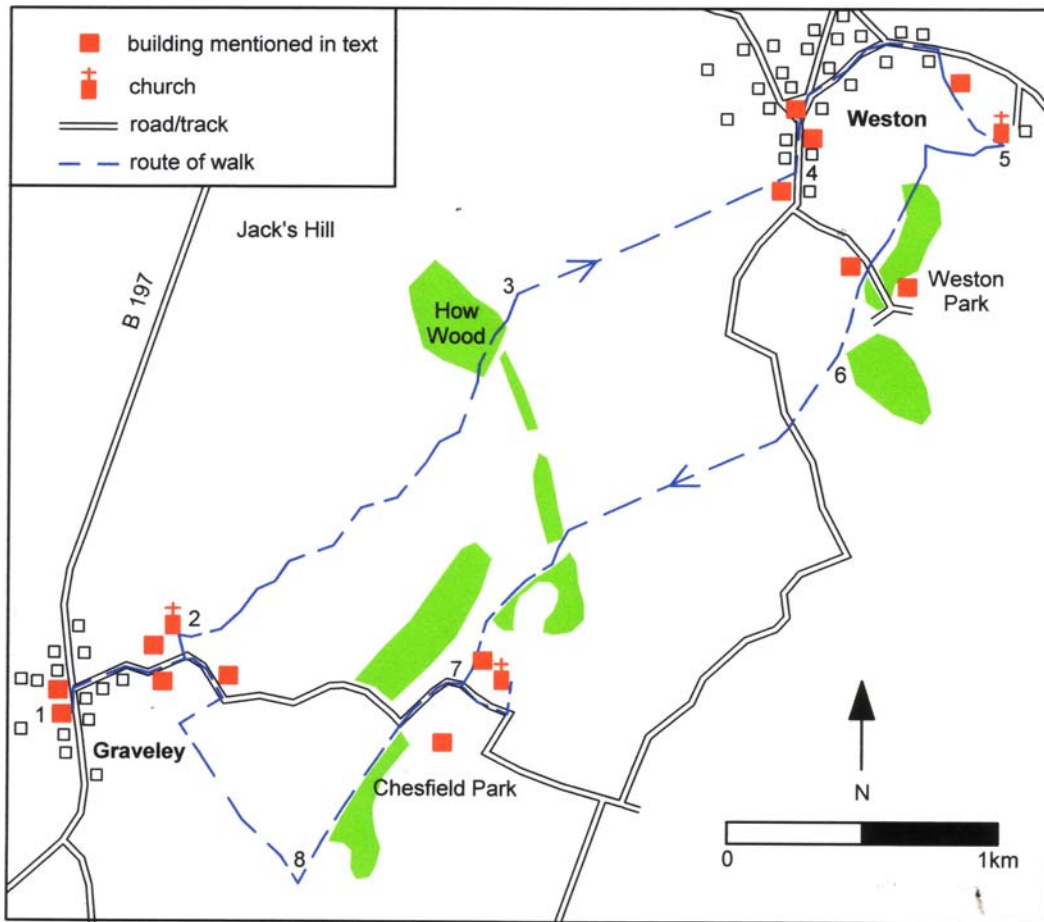
Ruined church of St Etheldreda, Chesfield

Retrace your steps to 7 and follow the road around to the left. Follow this quiet country lane for 200 m. When it turns 90° to the right, you should carry straight on onto a track marked bridleway, with light woodland on your left and a large open field to your right. Aerial photographs show that there are the remnants of ditches and banks in this field, but it is not clear whether these are associated with the field systems of the deserted Chesfield village or with the drainage needs of the eighteenth-century landscaping of Chesfield Park – some of which is visible through the trees to your left.

Continue on this path until you reach a signpost at which you turn right with the sign for Hertfordshire Way/Circular Walk (8). After only a few metres on this path turn to look directly south, where at a distance of about 600 m you will see the spire of St Nicholas, the parish church of Old Stevenage with its Norman tower. This church is set apart from the original village of Stevenage and is well worth a visit to appreciate the mixture of architectural styles that it contains from twelfth century to nineteenth century. Keep along the well marked path for 400 m, bending slightly to the right with views to Hitchin in the distance to the north-west. At the end of this track you reach a T-junction and green metal gates.

Turn right here. Follow the path for 100 m with a hedgerow on your left and a pasture field on your right. This brings you to a tarmac road where you turn left with the Hertfordshire Way signpost. 10 m down the lane on your right is a substantial 16th-century timber framed building called the Cottage Rectory End. This consists of the original build to your right as you look at it, with the later addition of an extra bay to the left of the original chimney breast. Carry on down the lane for 75 m until you reach St Mary's church and Graveley Hall Farm, where you turn left and retrace your route back to Graveley High Street.

Graveley is situated on the B 197 about 2km north of junction 8 on the A1M. The nearest train station is Hitchin from which there are hourly return bus services on the number 54. For timetable details see: <http://www.showbus.co.uk/timetableslondon.htm#Hertfordshire>



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