

**Industry and Agriculture.** A working corn mill once stood at Westmill Farm (c1600 -c1900, see photo). Creation of the deep, straight Mill Stream, which powered the mill, altered the course of the original river. North of the river is a wet area where willow, reed and rush were once grown and harvested. The area fell into neglect in the 1920s when demand for these products dwindled. It is now Oughtonhead Nature Reserve run by Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust (not accessible to the public).



The Old Mill c1930. Destroyed by fire 1960

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**Grazing.** The site was originally a medieval “cow common” where Hitchin “commoners” grazed their cattle. Of little use as agricultural land due to its wetness and winter flooding, this was one of the few uses the land could be put to. Grazing maintained a rich diversity of plant and bird life for which the site was renowned in times past. The cessation of grazing (c1914) led to scrub invasion and threatened the grassland habitat. In 1996, grazing with English Longhorn cattle was re-introduced, thus restoring an ancient tradition and controlling further scrub invasion.



English Longhorn grazing

**River Walk - Bedford Rd to The Chalky (2km). Surfaced path; suitable for all users.**

The path can be accessed from the Bedford Rd entrance or any of the three surfaced side-paths running off Burford Way. All have kissing gate access suitable for wheelchairs (Westmill Lane has access for large mobility vehicles (RADAR gate)).

At **1** note Alder trees with small cones and the arching stems of Pendulous Sedge; both like wet conditions. **2** The overflow for the Mill Stream is known locally as “Hitchin Waterfall”. Here the river divides for a while forming a small island. **3** Opening to the west is the ancient Grazing Common, now grazed by English Longhorn cattle. **4** Across the river is Oughtonhead Nature Reserve (not open to the public) an area of wet woodland dominated by Alder and Silver Birch. The walk finishes at The Chalky a popular picnic site but can be extended a further 500m to take in the Springhead, the source of the River Oughton.

**Commons Walk - Long (1.5km); short (0.75km). Grassy paths, can be slippery in winter.**

The path can be accessed from the River Walk, the Car Park at Swinburne Ave or from Redhill Rd via Oughtonhead Lane. Kissing gate access is not suitable for wheelchairs.

**5** The path skirts around the three Grazing Compartments; English Longhorn cattle, an ancient breed, usually graze all year round. **6** Take a short detour to view the Cattle Pond where toads and newts breed in the spring. Once back on the main path, a turning off to the left provides the short route back to the Car Park which passes between the Grazing Compartments. **7** The towering Beech trees in The Spinney were planted in 1842 by the Lucas family who lived at Old Westmill farmhouse. **8** This part of the site is the driest, the grassland here being very different from that nearer the river. However, springs are still active here, feeding a wet ditch system running through the middle of the meadow. The walk ends when it meets the River Walk at **3**.

**Key**

- Surfaced Path
- River Walk/Restricted Byway (permitted users: pedestrians, cyclists, horse riders, horse-drawn carriages)
- Wet Ditches
- Grazing compartment fence-line
- Commons Walk
- Large mobility vehicle access gate (RADAR)
- Wheelchair Access

**Please follow the Countryside Code:**

- Be thoughtful to other users
- Take your litter home
- Leave the wildlife site as you found it.

If you have a dog with you please keep it under control to avoid disturbing the cattle and the birds, especially during the nesting season. Dog bins are provided at most entrances to the site. Thank you.

We hope you enjoy your visit. For more information on this and other sites in N. Herts and other walks in the area visit [www.hertsdirect.org/CMS](http://www.hertsdirect.org/CMS).

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