

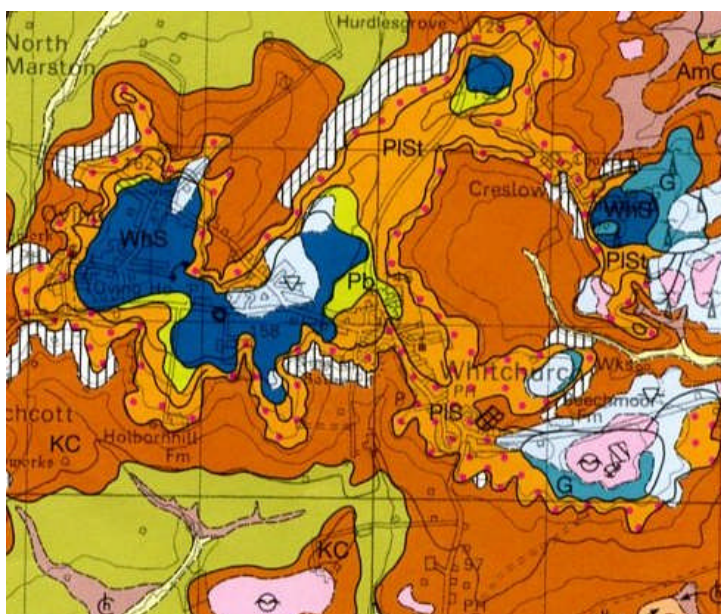


Bucks Earth Heritage Group

Walk around Whitchurch From its geological to historical past

Geology 1: Whitchurch in the tropics

The rocks that lie beneath Whitchurch belong to two eras the first under tropical seas and the second under ice! The first era is the Jurassic and the rocks are called the Portland and the Purbeck beds. These rocks are limestones and sandstones which were laid down under a tropical climate. The oldest are the **Portland Beds** and these underlie the southern part of the village – exactly underneath the line of the A413 and the land just either side of the road. There is more of this rock eastwards from the road – it stretches out beneath St John's church and almost out to Beechmoor Farm.



Key:

- Pink colour patches = glacial sands
- Pale blue patches = Till (glacial deposit)
- WhS = Whitchurch Sandstone
- Pb = Purbeck
- PIS/PISt = Portland Sand/Stone
- KC = Kimmeridge Clay

The Portland beds were laid down in a warm, shallow tropical sea about 150 million years ago. Evidence for this is the limestone itself and also fossils such as ammonites.



Portland Limestone in the High Street full of lime mud and fossil shells

A local ammonite called Titanites giganteus from the Portland rocks of Whitchurch →

The **Purbeck** beds are to be found at the northern end of the village – at the roundabout and Market Hill and the Castle end. These rocks were laid down in nearshore and freshwater environments around 145 million years ago during a time when sea-level was falling and the area was about to emerge as land. The **Whitchurch Sands** lie over the Purbeck and are found northwest of the village, from just NW of the Castle to Oving. These deep red sandstones were laid down in rivers that criss-crossed the newly formed land 140 million years ago and you can see them in building stones in surrounding villages.



The Whitchurch Sandstone can be found occasionally as a building stone as in this wall.

The emergence as land explains why a massive amount of erosion has removed much of the following sediments. Many millions of years worth of geological history is missing from this part of Bucks.

Geology 2: Whitchurch under ice

Around 2.6 million years ago the climate began to deteriorate and Bucks was caught in the grip of the Ice Age. It was tundra for much of this time and a large ice sheet ground its way over the County. The evidence is in the form of sediments called ‘till’ and various sands and gravels.



Till – mix of clay, sand, gravel and boulders left behind in the wake of the ice sheet half a million years ago.

Till is a clay with many sizes and types of pebbles and it is deposited beneath the moving ice. The ice plucks up rocks and pulverises them leaving behind a mix of clay to boulder size fragments on the frozen

ground it passes over. Till is present to the SE of the village, around Beechmoor Farm, and either side of the Whitchurch to Oving road. This is where sands and gravels are found too – possibly formed from outwash from the retreating ice.

Whitchurch's archaeological past:

Hunter gatherers

There are no known prehistoric remains in the area. This is not surprising as the first people to inhabit the UK (from the Palaeolithic to Mesolithic periods, up to 10,000 years ago) were mobile and they left very little imprint on the landscape. Other than their stone tools, they would leave no archaeological record - as organic materials (bone, skins or wood items) would decay. Also, these people most likely navigated their densely wooded landscape by the main river valleys and hence they may never or only rarely have strayed into the area around Whitchurch.

The first farmers

By the Neolithic (6500 to 4500 years ago) people began to settle and farm the land. There are some flint artefacts found near to Whitchurch and these may indicate farming of this part of Bucks had just commenced.

A Neolithic polished hand axe →



Warfaring Whitchurch

The Bronze Age to the Iron Age (4,500 to 2000 years ago) saw a growing population and growing conflicts for land and resources. Many of the field boundaries we see today owe their presence to the first boundaries laid down in the Bronze Age.



Roman Whitchurch

There is evidence for people in the area during the Roman occupation. These would have been local people (the Britons) farming and living nearby. Pottery and boundary ditches have been located and a burial ground (found near Chatwell Stream) would have been just outside a settlement area.

Roman pottery

The Saxons – what's in a name?

The name Whitchurch gives away the fact that the Saxons lived in, and named, the village. They spelled it '*hwit cirice*' literally meaning 'white church'.

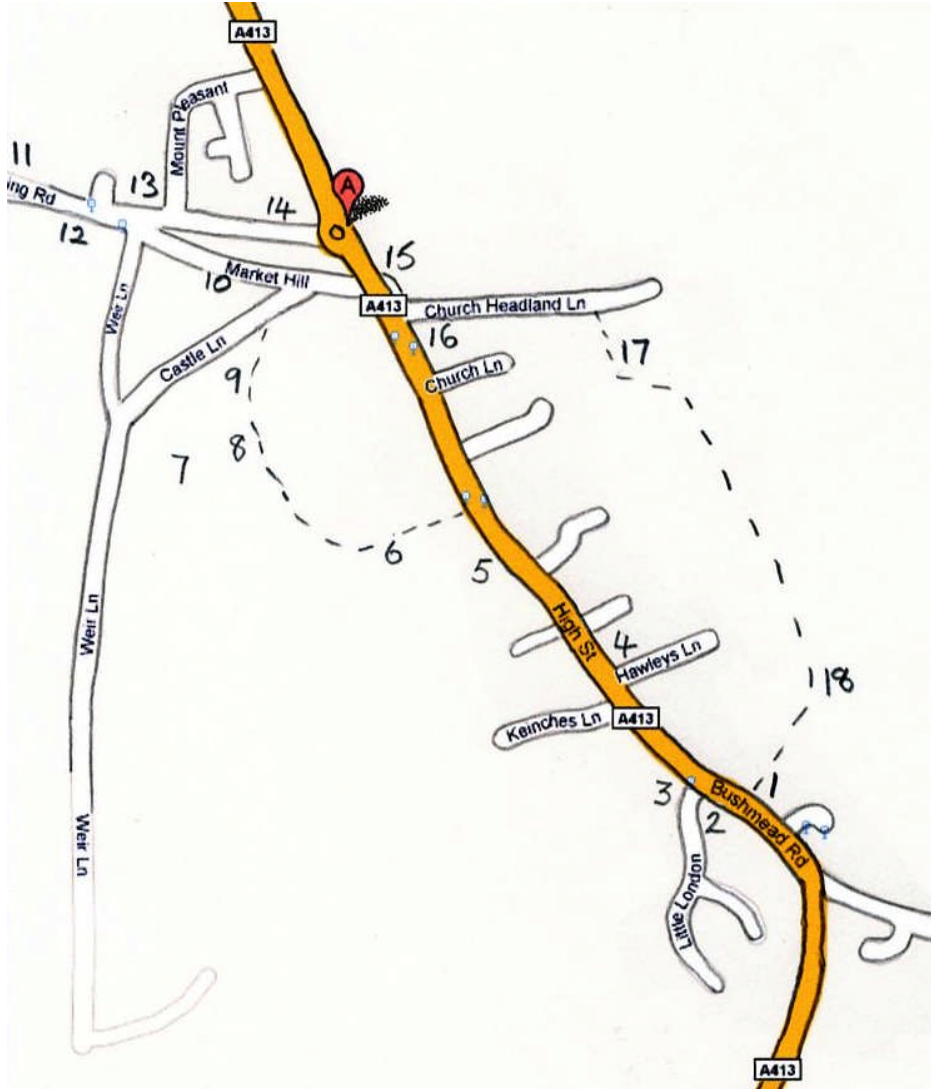
Medieval to modern times

The Medieval period is still very evident in and around Whitchurch, either as standing structures or place or field names. For instance, there is evidence of Bolebec Castle and its deer park nearby, there are late medieval buildings in the High Street and Market Hill. We know about the medieval market and the mill (Dunn Mill), and also that a church has been in Whitchurch since the 10th century. In the 1801 census the social class of Whitchurch was noted as a concentration of professionals and unskilled labourers. In John Wilson's Gazetteer of 1870-72 the value of Whitchurch was put as £4,475 with a population of 884 people in 201 houses.

Whitchurch Village walk

The route:

Takes 1 hour (without stops) c. 2 miles leisurely pace; flat ground; 3 stiles to cross.
Depending where you park, or what your preference is, this walk can start at any point.



1. The White Swan pub

This is a good place to start the walk in the village centre. The White Swan was here in the 1700s, when it was called the Queens Head until 1785.

2. The Firs

Across the road is The Firs which was built in 1897 on the site of a house of the same name. This house has an interesting World War II link – as ‘Winston Churchill’s toyshop’. It was so named because it housed the top inventors and scientists of the day who were given a free reign to come up with ideas, sometimes seemingly wild ideas, to design weapons that would help win the war. It housed over 250 staff, including 120 women, who masterminded 26 different weapons for the war effort including Sticky Bombs, the Blacker Bombard, the Spigot Mortar, and the ‘Piat’ gun. This important munitions factory remained top secret from 1940 to 1946.

Walk up the High Street to uncover more of the history of the village.

3. Little London

The road adjacent to the Firs is called Little London and is known as the location for lace making and silk weaving which Bucks became rightly famous for.

4. The Deerstalkers

Note the herringbone brickwork on this building. Brick-making and extracting the clay for bricks, was a big industry until recently. Now almost all the clay pits in the County, including the one in Whitchurch, are closed down. This building makes an attractive use of this local commodity and this one shop was originally 3 cottages.

5. Winster Paddocks

Conveniently situated on the main road this used to be the Cock Inn and is recorded as a coaching inn in 1636. From 1914 to 1989 it was a butchers shop.

Turn left onto the path by the telephone box.

6. Spring Cottage

This cottage is aptly named as it is next to **Whittle Hole Spring**. This was an important water source for the village. There are several springs around Whitchurch and their presence was no doubt a strong influence as to why the village was set up here, water being so essential to settlement. The spring marks the junction of the permeable Portland rocks with the Kimmeridge Clay underneath. Rainwater seeps into the Portland limestone and sandstones until it hits the impermeable clay. It will then run along the boundary until the impermeable horizon reaches a hill side or slope where the water will emerge as a spring.

Walk further along the path, through the gate, bear right and through the meadow, following the path signs.

7. Viewpoint of the Aylesbury Vale

A classic view of how geology controls landscape. The low ground is underlain by clays and the higher points in the landscape (including Whitchurch) are underlain by harder rocks – such as the Jurassic limestones and sandstones.

Walk over the stream and stile to Castle Mound.

8. Fair Alice Spring

Another spring which is part of the same spring line as Whittle Hole, but this one rises from the base of the ancient mound. Tradition has it that this water has remedial properties for good health. The stream it feeds has never been known to run dry and used to power the great wheel of Dunn Mill at the bottom of Weir Lane.

9. Bolebec Castle

This motte and bailey castle is believed to have been thrown up by Hugh de Bolebec during the anarchy of 1147. Little is known of its structure, but it is thought to have had a masonry keep and the deep defences of the motte enhanced naturally defensive ground. The triangular bailey is now separated from its motte by the road. Cromwell was responsible for its destruction during the Civil War (1642-1651), but some of the old stonework can be located in present buildings around the village!

Continue across the field to the thatched cottage, turning right into Castle Lane, then left into Market Hill.

10. Market Hill

As its name implies this was the site of the village market since 1245. This market, together with the mill, would have been the life-blood of the village (and source of control by the Lord of the Manor). The market was a weekly event and there was also a yearly fair held. The fair was resurrected in 1979 and is now held on May Day.

Cross the road at the Oving Road and walk up as far as Stonehouse.

11. Stonehouse wall

The long length of natural stone wall is made from the local Portland Limestone – like so many of the village's older buildings. Look at the nature of the rock to find fine, clay-rich types and some blocks composed of tiny 'balls' called ooliths. Many of the stones have fossils such as oysters and other bivalves and gastropods. These tell you much about the warm, shallow seas with gentle currents.

Walk back in the direction of the High Street and pause at Bolbec House.

12. Bolbec House

The famous artist Rex Whistler lived here and he painted the famous painting *The Vale of Aylesbury* from this garden.

Head back towards the village centre roundabout down the Oving Road

13. Whitchurch House

This house was built in 1620 but is famous as the home of Joyce Anstruther (1901-1953) better known as Jan Struther - the author of *Mrs Miniver* which was later made into the well-known film. She is also known for her hymn *Lord of all hopefulness*.

14. The Old School House

Just before the roundabout the Old School House dates to the 1500s and the building nearest the road is the Master's house.

Cross over the roundabout

15. The village sign

This was erected to mark the millennium and was carved by a local craftsman.

16. The Old House

Built originally c. 1400 by the monks of Woburn Abbey.

Take the steep path to St John's Church

17. St John's Church

A church has been on this site since the 10th century and this church dates from the 13th to 15th century. It is built from Portland Limestone – mostly the local kind, but spot the newer repairs which are made from Portland stone from Dorset.

Go through the opposite church gate, and turn immediately left onto the footpath. Follow the circular path signs, through 4 gates in turn and follow the path to the right, through two gates, to emerge at the old brick pits.

18. The Old Brick Pits

This is the location of an important industry throughout the Victorian period to recent times. The clay extraction here ceased in 1928 and it is now left for wildlife.

Continue on this path (1 more gate) and go right to the High Street at the Swan pub.