



Tring Boundary Trail

(updated in 2020 for alternative route in north section)

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Tring owes its existence as a town to the need to get people and things from A to B. As you follow the Tring Boundary Trail (TBT), you can travel back in time and encounter the places and people that have contributed to Tring’s rich history as well as some far more modern developments.

But first, if you’re following the TBT, you might like to know where Tring is, why it’s there and where its boundary lies. Legacies and evidence of all that follows can be spotted as you make your way round the TBT.

The Where and Why of Tring?

The town of Tring nestles at the foot of the Chiltern Hills in Hertfordshire. The Hills have been there for millennia, most recently shaped by the ending of the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago. More importantly, Tring is located next to a low point through the hills, known as the Tring Gap. Since ancient times this has acted as a thoroughfare north and south through the Chilterns.

Tring also sits on the Icknield Way, the ancient east - west route used by travellers for thousands of years and which runs along the north-facing scarp slope of the Chilterns. This connected Britain’s largest Neolithic centres in East Anglia and on Salisbury Plain so dates back at least 5,000 years.

3,000 years ago Iron Age settlers built hill forts along the top of the hills and 2,000 years ago, with the arrival of the Romans in Britain, the first road system developed. The Roman bases at St Albans and Cirencester were connected by Akeman Street which passed through the Tring Gap and headed out towards Aylesbury. So imagine legions of Roman soldiers marching through Tring Park and along Park Street which traces the route of Roman Akeman Street.

Many towns develop next to a river but Tring doesn’t have one – or does it? There were certainly plenty of water sources where the rain, which fell on the sponge-like chalk hills, emerged from springs at the foot of the slopes (think about Mis-well and Pond Close). In fact, it’s possible that Tring can lay claim to being a source of the mighty River Thames, more of which in the detailed commentary below.

With the confluence of strategically important trade and military routes, it was inevitable that a settlement should develop and that is why Tring is where it is. It was certainly here a thousand years ago during the Norman Conquest as it features in the Domesday Book and there is evidence in local place names of earlier Saxon and Danish influence (Dunsley = Dane’s meadow, Pendley = Penda’s meadow).

Tring probably grew slowly in the Medieval period. After the Romans left, no-one looked after the roads (plus ca change) and it wasn't until the mid 1700s that transport was improved with the opening of the Watford to Aylesbury turnpike toll road which passed through Tring.

And whilst Tring's river may be something of a mystery, in the early years of the 19th century another waterway brought prosperity to the town. The Grand Junction Canal was the M1 of its day and Tring was at its summit. In fact, the father of inland navigation, Francis Egerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, lived at Ashridge and the TBT starts at the foot of his monument.

The canal age was short-lived but Tring benefitted from the arrival of the railway Steam Age in the 1830s as Robert Stephenson (of the revolutionary Rocket steam engine fame) engineered the Tring Cutting and the London and Birmingham Railway.

In the 20th century, Tring's transport connections continued to develop though less auspiciously. The Tring By-pass, the A41(M), was one of the country's shortest (and shortest lived) motorways and now only features as a motorway in cyberspace on the website, www.pathetic.org.uk.

Less pathetic and little noticed, most of England's petroleum products today pass silently through Tring in the buried UK Oil Pipeline which traverses England from the Thames estuary to the Mersey. The TBT crosses it 5 times. Look out for pink-capped posts.

What are the boundaries of Tring?

Once we know where Tring is, the boundary should be simple? Not so.

Is the boundary at the edge of the town or further afield? Does it embrace the surrounding villages? If so which ones? Should it be based on civil parishes or church parishes? And if the latter, which churches should be included?

For the purposes of defining the TBT, the decision is somewhat arbitrary but we have plumped for the *ecclesiastical* parish which includes the *civil* parishes of Tring, Tring Rural and Aldbury. As civil parishes are a far more recent form of administrative organization, the church parish is more likely to reflect Tring as it was 700 years ago. A map of the Tring parish can be found on the website www.achurchnearyou.com. In outline, it resembles an armless, dancing clown! Alternatively, the top part is the wagging finger of Hertfordshire where it pokes out deep into Buckinghamshire. In fact, about 30km of the 45km TBT follows the county boundary between Herts and Bucks.

Tring parish therefore includes the town itself as well as the villages of Aldbury, Long Marston, Puttenham and Wilstone. Interestingly, it is also a doughnut parish; it has a hole in the middle. Just to the west of Long Marston, there is an area of land which belongs to the Diocese of Oxford and therefore is excluded from the parish of Tring, which belongs to St Albans diocese.

Tring parish doesn't include Wigginton. Wigginton is now connected with Northchurch as a church parish but back in the year 1300, Wigginton church became annexed to Tring. On this basis the TBT route takes in part of Wigginton.

Finally, although Wingrave, Drayton Beauchamp, Cholesbury and Marsworth are on the TBT route, they are all in fact in Buckinghamshire. As most of the

public footpaths don't follow the parish boundary, we have kept as close to it as possible but couldn't avoid the detours into foreign territory!

The TBT section by section – facts along the way

On the following pages, points of interest along the TBT are cross-referenced to the paragraph numbers in the route description.

Bridgewater Monument *via* Cow Roast to Wigginton

Para 1.1 The soaring Grecian column at the start of the TBT celebrates the life of the "Canal Duke", Francis Egerton, 3rd Duke of Bridgewater (1736-1803). He pioneered the development of canals to service his coal mines in Lancashire. The Egerton family had owned the estate at Ashridge since the 1600s. The Monument was erected in 1832.

The building which now houses Ashridge Business School dates from 1803. It is built in the Gothic style which became fashionable at the start of the 19th century – battlements, turrets and towers. It boasts the longest frontage of any house in England, around 300 metres.

Para 1.4 As you cross the canal bridge at Cow Roast, notice the square brick building next to the road. This houses a pump and covers a borehole into the chalk aquifer from which water is drawn to top-up the canal. This is part of the extensive system of reservoirs, pipelines and pumping stations around Tring which keep the Grand Union, formerly Grand Junction, canal filled with water.

Less visibly, you are also now crossing the line of Tring's mystery river, The Bulbourne. Today the river rises in the field behind the BMW garage just to the left of the canal bridge and flows through Berkhamsted to Hemel. Before the canal was built, the source was at Bulbourne (visited at para 1.32 of TBT). The outflow from a spring at Bulbourne flowed through the Tring Gap to form the River Bulbourne which merges with other rivers eventually to join the Thames at Staines. The canal across the Tring summit was built through this marshy land in the Tring Gap thereby shifting the river's source to Cow Roast.

Cow Roast's peculiar name is thought to be corrupted from 'Cow Rest'. The Tring Gap was for a long time a major route for taking cattle to market in London and the inn was a regular station for drovers to halt their cattle for refreshment. Cow Roast was also a minor Roman town sitting on Akeman Street probably with a market and iron smelting works.

Wigginton *via* Hawridge Common, Cholesbury and Hastoe to Aylesbury Road Tring

Para 1.7 As you cross the road and enter the fields you pass from Wigginton parish back into Tring parish and the TBT to Hawridge runs parallel to the Chesham Road which is the parish boundary. The fields here were once Wigginton Common and only became 'enclosed' into geometric fields in 1854.

Para 1.10 The circular Hill Fort at Cholesbury was probably constructed in the middle Iron Age, about 100 BC. The bank you are standing on is the outer of two banks surrounding the fort. When occupied, there would have been wooden staves along the whole of the inner bank. Where you turn right, away from the fort, is one of the original entrances which would have been heavily fortified with a palisade of staves.

Para 1.12 Near Hastoe you reach the highest point of the TBT and have also conquered the summit of Hertfordshire, 244 metres (800ft) above sea level. From here you have 156m (531ft) of descent to the lowest point on the TBT (see para 1.21).

Para 1.13 The dual carriageway you cross is the A41 Tring Bypass. During the Second World War, discussions started to relieve traffic through Hemel, Berkhamsted and Tring. They continued through the 50s and 60s with plans for a Watford to Tring motorway. The 2-mile Tring Bypass, from London Road to Tring Hill was opened in 1975 as a motorway, the A41(M), but the section towards Berkhamsted was delayed due to archaeological discoveries at Cow Roast. Motorway status was removed from Tring in 1987 and only in 1993 was the road connection to the M25 completed. You can't help feeling the Romans would have done things more quickly.

Aylesbury Road, Tring *via* Wilstone Reservoir to Astrope

Para 1.14 The Wendover Arm Canal was constructed in 1797. To feed the summit of the Grand Junction Canal at Tring, a reliable source of water was vital. It was decided that the feeder would be the springs at Wendover. The flow of water proved to be insufficient and the canal leaked from the outset so between 1802 and 1815 the four Tring reservoirs were built to keep the summit full. They were later supplemented by the bore hole at Cow Roast (see para 1.4).

The Wendover Arm between this canal bridge and Little Tring was "de-watered" in 1904. In 1997, work began to restore the canal which is why you see water in it today. In fact, to the left of the bridge you pass beside one of the country's most recently built stretches of canal. The old course was consumed by the new Aston Clinton bypass in 2003 and a new section built to pass beneath the road.

Para 1.16 Wilstone Reservoir is the largest of the four Tring reservoirs. It contains the largest reed bed in Hertfordshire.

Para 1.18 The next canal is the Aylesbury Arm of the Grand Union, built in 1815. Just beyond bridge No7 as you leave the canal, you can see Bates Boatyard. It still builds wooden narrowboats and launches them with a big splash from a sideslip into the canal.

Astrope *via* Wingrave to Long Marston (note – this section not covered if following the shorter route alternative)

Para 1.22 As you pass through the second field here, notice the undulations. This is a fine example of a Saxon/medieval ridge and furrow field. Later ploughing has erased most of these. Fields like this date from the 'open-field' system of farming when villages or manors divided up large fields into strips. One small family managed each strip. Traditionally, they were a furlong (furrow-long) in length, 220 yards, and up to a chain, 22 yards, wide (hence a cricket pitch).

Para 1.23 Just after passing beneath the power lines and at the metal gate in the hedge, you are at the lowest point of the TBT, 82m (269ft) above sea level.

You are also standing on the route of the Cheddington to Aylesbury railway – broadly along the line of the hedge. It was a branch line off the main London and Birmingham Railway and is said to have been the world’s first branch railway. To your right you can just see a house – this is the old Marston Gate station. The railway was opened in 1839 and closed in 1963 in the ‘Beeching era’ when many branch lines were controversially closed. The house is now called “Beeching House”!

A little further on, at the squeeze gate, you cross the parish and County boundary into Buckinghamshire. Here be dragons. This is the tip of Hertfordshire’s wagging finger and virtually the western-most point of Herts. The stream you cross is the Thistlebrook – it rises a short way to the east, flows into the River Thames at Aylesbury and then the Thames. So Tring could claim two sources of the Thames!

Para 1.26 Safely back in Hertfordshire, on the face of it these long stretches through fields are featureless and the area feels a little desolate. It may be because you are passing the site of two Anglo-Saxon villages – Tiscott and Ardwick – now completely vanished save for a few bumps in the ground.

Para 1.28 At the steps, you once again cross the old railway line (see above). It’s easy to imagine the steam engines puffing through this small cutting. As you emerge from the trees, enjoy the magnificent views back to the Chiltern escarpment.

Long Marston via Marsworth and the reservoirs to Marshcroft Lane, Tring

Para 1.19 and 1.30 This is the place to spot the rare, native Black Poplar trees. They are the most endangered of UK trees but the Long Marston area is home to 1200, a tenth of the entire UK population. They grow in damp ground alongside streams, ditches and ponds. The trees are big, tend to lean to one side and the lowest branches sweep downwards and the tips then turn up. You will find the triangular leaf shape depicted on the waymark posts for the Black Poplar Trail. The wood was used to make sheep hurdles, wattles and fruit baskets. Today, they are sometimes used to make artificial limbs.

Para 1.32 In April 1751, Wilstone and Gubblecote were the locations for the last known witch killing in England. Ruth Osborne, a local pauper, was accused of being a witch and mob-rule resulted in her being “ducked” in a pond. As it was only inches deep, she inevitably “floated” so was therefore guilty as a witch. The ringleader of the mob, Thomas Colley, attacked her and she died from drowning. Four months later, Colley himself was found guilty of her murder and hung at the scene of the crime at Gubblecote Cross. Watch out for his ghost in Lukes Lane!

Where you turn into the garden, on the other side of the road is the old Long Marston airfield. It was used as an aerodrome in the First World War and in the Second World War it accommodated the US 8th Army Air Force. Winston Churchill is said to have frequently visited the underground bunker and in the 1960s the site was said to be used by the CIA and MI6 to store NATO weapons in the event of Europe being invaded by the Soviets.

Para 1.35 The Grand Junction Canal, joining London and Birmingham, was completed in 1805 but reached Tring in 1799. The Marsworth top lock marks the start of the Tring summit. This is the highest point in the canal’s 130-mile

length and passes through the Tring Gap in a deep, hand-dug cutting; a major engineering achievement for its time.

The summit pound is three and a half miles long, between the top lock next to the junction with the Wendover Arm and reaching Cow Roast. The large house next to the lock was the Marsworth Toll Office.

Ahead you will pass the canal workshop which constructed locks for all the canals in southern England. Note the Italianate water-tower capped with a spire.

After passing the Grand Junction pub and beneath the road bridge, note the significant widening of the canal. This was the location of the Bulbourne spring head mentioned in para 1.4 above.

The canal system has adapted over the years from its original commercial purpose to being a major leisure facility. It has also embraced the telecommunication age. In 1871, Aylesbury was first linked directly to London by the telegraph that ran on poles and wires beside the canal in the cutting.

The canal remains relevant even in the 21st century. As you pass along the towpath, imagine the terabytes or zettabytes of information flowing along the fibre-optic superhighway buried directly below your feet, connecting the major cities in the UK.

Marshcroft Lane, Tring to Bridgewater Monument

Para 1.36 From the bridge over the railway, take in Tring's second wonder of transport engineering, the Tring Cutting. A writer of the time said, "The contemplation of this vast undertaking fills the mind with wonder and admiration".

Built from 1835 over the course of 3 years by 500 men, the deep excavations were removed by horse runs – steep inclines of planks wide enough for a two-wheeled barrow. A rope passed down the incline and a horse in the field above would pull the barrow which would be guided by a navy hanging onto the barrow and running up in an almost horizontal position. Dangerous work!

The railway line through Tring is now the West Coast Main Line. It originated as the London and Birmingham Railway Company, first arriving at Tring in 1837.

The recent debate about the proposed route of HS2 has echoes of events in the 1830s. The L&B Railway was originally planned to pass through the Gaddesden valley but local landowners, the original NIMBYs, protested. They were in fact the hugely influential estate owners, particularly the Bridgewaters at Ashridge.

Great Gaddesden's loss of a railway station was Tring's gain. This scotches the myth that Tring Station is so far from the town because the Rothschild family objected to it being closer. The Rothschilds didn't arrive in Tring until the late 19th century.

However, the station was very nearly built at Pitstone. It was planned for the Tring location but the owner of the land in Tring, the Pendley estate, demanded too high a price. When the Tring residents heard about the Pitstone option, 169 of them signed a petition "*praying that a station may be formed at Pendley*". The L&B Railway Company eventually agreed provided

the Tring residents put up the extra money. We can thank our Tring ancestors and their generous crowdfunding for having a station in Tring today.

Para 1.37 On the left of the path uphill is Pitstone Quarry. For 60 years up to 1991, chalk was extracted for the huge, local cement works, now demolished. A small amount of chalk extraction still occurs. Pre-dating this by 6,000 years, flint was mined on Pitstone Hill in the Neolithic Age. The distinctive hollows of these mines can be found 100m to your left as you reach the crest of the hill.

Para 1.38 As you descend the path on the back of Aldbury Nowers, enjoy the views over to Ivinghoe Beacon to the left. The large fields immediately beneath your view contain evidence of a “Celtic” field system dating from the Iron and Bronze Ages (not visible on the ground but shows up in aerial photos). On the Beacon, you can make out the defensive ditch of the Iron Age fort which runs round the top of the beacon. Look for the small hedge line.

Main Sources:

The Chilterns - published 1992, Leslie Hepple and Alison Doggett

The Railway Comes to Tring - published 2013, Ian Petticrew and Wendy Austin

The Waterway Comes to Tring - published 2013, Petticrew and Austin

Water From Wendover - published 2013, Shelley Savage

Ashridge Estate - National Trust guide

