

Knolls Wood is a plantation of trees and flowering shrubs in the north of Leighton Buzzard. On former heathland, between the market town and Heath & Reach village, it's not a natural wood but a grand garden covering an area the size of about 5 football pitches (between 3 and 4 hectares or 7.5 acres). At a range around 100m above sea level, the wood is at a slightly higher elevation than the centre of town. The river Ouzel runs nearby, west of the wood and flowing north from the chalky Chiltern Hills. Roughly the shape of a backwards letter 'C', Knolls Wood is surrounded by sustained housing growth, between Redwood Glade off Plantation Road, (to the west), and Copper Beech Way off Heath Road, (to the east). To the north is Sandy Lane before the golf course and to the south are more homes and Dovers Down Lower School.

These road names are not by chance – redwood, plantation, sandy, heath; they are all inspired by the history of the land.

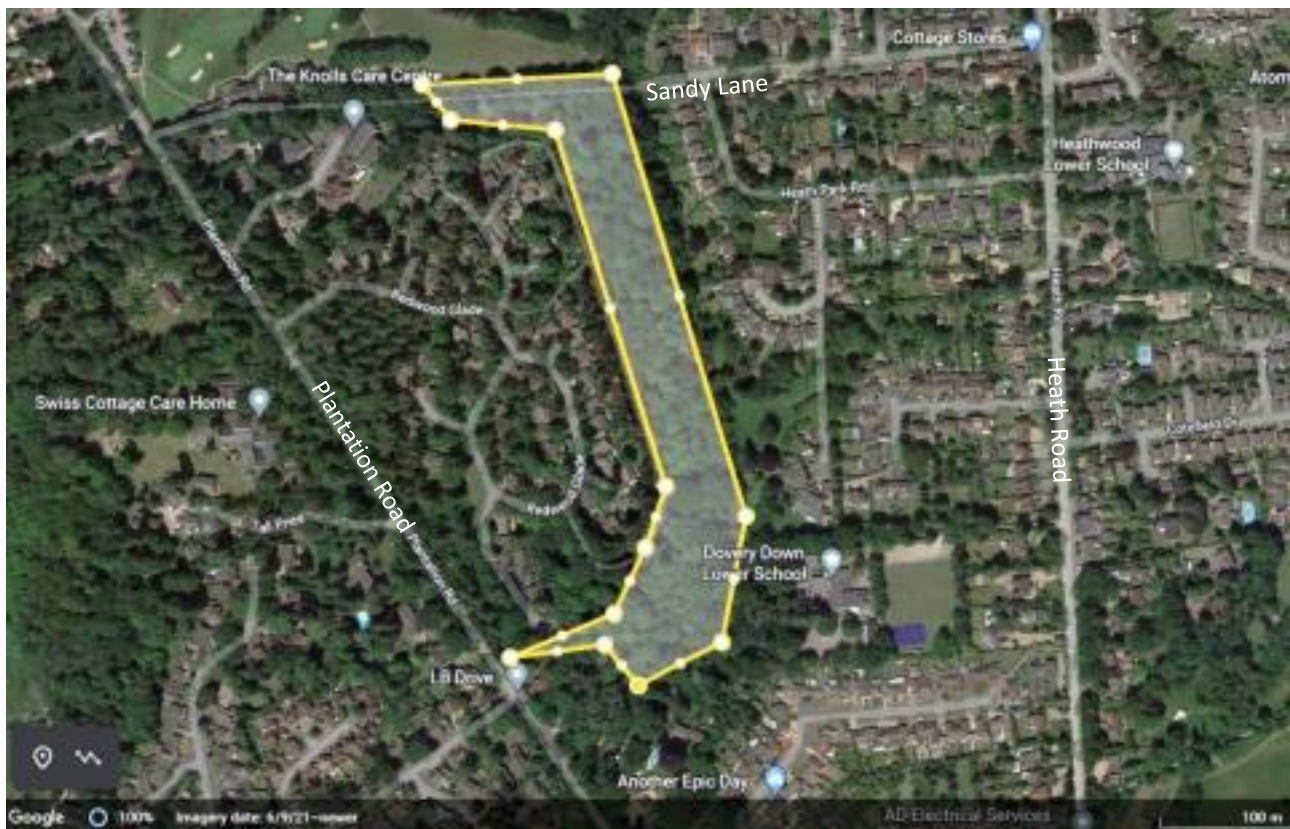
Lat & long 51°56'09"N 0°39'42"W

Elevation between 96m and 103m

Entrance from Sandy Lane grid ref SP920272

The underlying soil is sand - light, dry and acidic, from the seabed of the Cretaceous period. In times when the dinosaurs roamed our local terrain was underwater, and when the landscape changed, the water left behind the ridge of lower greensand, now named the Woburn Sands formation (Natural England, 2013).

In the 1770s the first of the Bassett family arrived in town; Peter Bassett was a draper from Northamptonshire, and it is his eldest son, John Dollin Barnard Bassett, who we must thank for our unique retreat. In the early 1840s the open fields of Leighton Buzzard were enclosed, and some sold. In 1844 John Dollin Bassett bought an extensive tract of common on Leighton Heath and started planting trees (Brown and Masters, 1989), naming the area The Plantation. Set amongst 70 acres of glorious purple and gold heathland, John started with a mixture of hardwoods (like Beech, Ash, Oak, Sweet Chestnuts) for utility and profit; but this was the Victorian era, when a craze for plant collecting meant formal and ornamental gardens were being created to showcase 'new' plants, brought back from travels. Victorian gardeners created a wide range of artificial landscapes, and you could



Map of Knolls Wood showing approximate perimeter (Googlemap.com, 2021)

The story of Knolls Wood history and the volunteers who look after it

say that Knolls Wood emulates a mountainous region with incredible Redwoods and exotic Monkey Puzzles. Robert Marnock assisted John with planting; he was a leading landscape gardener of the mid-19th century who also designed a garden for the Royal Botanic Society in Regent's Park (Parks & Gardens, 2008).

In 1880 Francis Bassett, son of John Dollin Bassett, built the mansion called The Knolls, so named after the ancient burial mounds within the grounds. Bowl barrows are funerary monuments dating from the Late Bronze Age (most examples from 2400-1500 BC), and there are over 10,000 surviving bowl barrows recorded nationally, occurring across most of lowland Britain. They were constructed as earthen or rubble mounds which

covered single or multiple burials in isolation or grouped as cemeteries. They exhibit regional variations in form and a diversity of burial practices, and are considered worthy of protection for representation of their period. One of our knolls is described on the Ancient Monuments website as 'a bowl barrow on level ground 600m east of the river, 20m in diameter and 1.5m high' (Ancient Monuments, 1999).

That's about 65ft across by 4.5ft high! The other is another large bowl barrow approximately 70m to the southwest.

Initially Francis' son Frederick lived at The Knolls with his family. It was when the house was built that an avenue of Monkey Puzzle trees was finished, lining the carriageway to the front door. An article in The Field newspaper, dated 12



Illustration of bowl barrows



Map of The Plantation area showing the carriageway to The Knolls mansion 1888 (archiuk.com, 2022)

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August 1871 described all of the arboriculture riches of the place including the fine, robust avenue. The approximate age of a Monkey Puzzle tree was confirmed by dendrochronology, after one was felled in a 2021 storm and the Director of The Tree Register, David Alderman, retrieved a sample. We believe trees of 15-20 years of age at 2m height were planted which must have been quite hard work but made an instant and impressive visual impact.

In a sale catalogue of 1918, The Knolls was described as standing 'amidst pleasure grounds and woodlands, containing a unique collection of specimen non-deciduous trees and shrubs, the whole extending to nearly 33 1/4 acres' (Brown and Masters, 1989). The west line of trees is now included within some lucky gardens of Redwood Glade, the cobbled Victorian carriageway is still visible underfoot in the wood today!



Photo of Monkey Puzzle Avenue Spring 2021

There are 3 species of tree referred to as Redwood: The Coastal Californian, which is the tallest tree in the world, the giant sequoia (also known as wellingtonia), and the Dawn Redwood which is native to China. In our wood we have the wellingtonia, nicknamed after the Duke of Wellington, the biggest trees in the world by

volume they can grow to 8m wide! The world's largest, living giant Sequoia is named 'General Sherman', found in California's Sequoia National Park. The tree is an incredible 84m tall and over 11m wide (roughly 280ft by 35ft). The tallest in our wood was measured at approximately 32m (105ft), but it's still a sight to see. When you pop down, see how many people it takes to join hands around the trunk.

The other distinctive tree we have is from South America; the Monkey Puzzle, also known as the Chilean Pine, and it is classed as endangered in its native habitat due to logging (Eden Project, 2022). These trees can take 40 years to produce seeds (by which time they've grown to quite a height), so they take a long time to re-establish. They can be seen dotted throughout the wood and a few young ones are taking up, but we think the most striking sight is the Monkey Puzzle Avenue when seen as you emerge from under the laurel by the Plantation Road entrance. Almost the length of the wood, both lines of evenly-spaced trees are now towering at 30m or more; the avenue was designed perfectly.

Considering the slight size of our area we have our fair share of variety in flora and fauna. By 1871, 250 different species were recorded. At the right time of year, you can find a number of different fungi including birds nest, earth balls and distinctive stinkhorn. In the bluebell season, although we're not an ancient woodland we are lucky to have a good smattering in two spots. It's easy to spot speedy squirrels, which you sometimes catch nibbling dinner on a tree stump, but not so easy to see the sneaky grass snake. In 2021, we accidentally caught on (blurry) video a green woodpecker flying overhead making its distinctive call, and we've also seen wrens and everyone's favourite the robin. To support biodiversity we have bird boxes, bat boxes and we create habitat piles from pruning and pollarding during our volunteer sessions. We were absolutely delighted to spot a Tawny Owl nesting in the wood last year; one member of our group set up a camera so we could keep an eye on things, and we had two chicks fledge!

The story of Knolls Wood history and the volunteers who look after it

You're quite possibly familiar with the Bassett name, even if you know none of the town history. We have Bassett Road opposite Waitrose and Mary Bassett School, but do you know how many other buildings in town have a Bassett connection? The Cedars house, the Church Square terrace, Lecton House on Lake Street and more (Ashby, 2011). The first bank of Leighton Buzzard was opened by Peter Bassett and 4 other Quakers. It was named Bassett, Grant & Co. and business was mostly conducted on the site where Barclays bank is now (Leighton-Linslade Past Times, 2010). The building standing now was constructed in 1866 at John Dollin Bassett's instruction, by Alfred Waterhouse who designed many well-known buildings, including the impressive Natural History Museum in London!

So, at the beginning of the 20th century The Knolls and land covered 33 acres, but over time the creep of development reached The Plantation. In the 1970s Taylors Ride, Redwood Glade and other suburban lanes were built. With the main residence and its lawns now separated, this reduced the core coverage of the wood to the 7.5 acres we have today. It was the inhabitants of these new houses that formed a group, rallying for the protection of the remainder of The Plantation, and they named themselves the Knolls Wood Protection Society (later the Knolls Wood Association). The group consists of two elements: a committee team for planning and managing money and a volunteer team for carrying out the practical tasks.

Households paid for membership of the association the first few years, which allowed the purchase of small tools to help manage the woodland. Starting off with more than 70, the numbers did dwindle, but in 1996 shot back up from 14 to 56 households. The committee tried to get the wood dedicated as a Local Nature Reserve, this was rejected because it wasn't of natural creation, but it is considered an educational resource and has many Tree Preservation Orders in place. In 1986 the woodland was taken into public ownership by South Beds District Council when a public inquiry found 'the trees have greater claim to the land than 5 new dwellings'. This was momentous. After this, the protection element of the

association was replaced by preservation and management to keep the area safe for public access in as organic a way as possible.

Some committee members took part, and still do, in the larger volunteer team. They handle tasks like litter picking, vegetation management, hedge-laying and tree planting under the watchful eye of a Greensand Trust ranger. The Greensand Trust (GST) also provide the equipment needed for these tasks, including loppers, bow saws and a wood-chipper. There is little rubbish to be found these days, however, there is an ongoing mystery with old vodka bottles surfacing every now and then, and so far, the count is 99! Recently found was a can of Carling Black Label dated 1992, yes 30 years later the date could be read clearly.

Unlike biological materials, manufactured items like these, and plastic, don't waste away, but lie in place as pollution and a danger to wildlife. There is no 'away' when something is 'thrown away'. Thankfully glass is one of those materials that can be forever recycled with no degradation, and the same goes for aluminium, so we always sort and clean the litter for recycling.



Kelly kettle on for the volunteers breaktime Jan 2022

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The volunteer team meets minimum 4 times a year, on a Sunday for up to 3 hours, always including a tea break with treats. The focus of the recent sessions has been to get certain plants under control, so they do not too much outdo other species in competition for sunlight and nutrients. There are swathes of holly and gorgeous rhododendron throughout the undergrowth but they limit biodiversity. What we cut down we put back in, either as chippings to rot down or in habitat piles for wildlife. In 2022 we planted some native trees, under the advice of Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC).

In Europe the average country coverage of forest is 38%; England is low at 13% (Forest Research, 2015). In the days when John Dollin Bassett was planting trees they were generally being chopped down, much used as a source of fuel and building material for a rapidly growing population. We've realised now that the coverage of forest in England needs to be increased again for lots of beneficial reasons and crucially to help combat global warming, so tree planting is a high priority. Trees sequester carbon, they provide shade and they purify the air we breathe. One of two areas which we cleared of brush has been planted with 7 native trees including Rowan, Turkey Oaks and Small-Leaved Lime. John also chose a Lime back in the 1870s, when trees were planted at the entrance to Parsons Close for the newly laid recreation ground. Additionally, we planted many whips to grow a thicket as shelter for animals – for example Hazel, Birch, Hawthorn and Dogwood.

Over the years since securing the wood as amenity land, the group, now named the Friends of Knolls Wood, has realised many achievements - obtaining byelaws, forging links with The Greensand Trust, public walks and many social events.

Our objectives are:

- ❖ To work with the GST and CBC to maintain, regenerate and enhance the overall appearance of Knolls Wood, reflecting its history, location, amenity and potential education value
- ❖ To prevent exploitation of, or threats to, the woodland and local environment
- ❖ To monitor long-term planning and involve the community
- ❖ To preserve the history of the wood

As membership fees are no longer collected from residents, the money for activities must be raised - Central Beds Council finance a ranger but the Friends work towards funding improvements to the greenspace. Local businesses have often been charitable. Last year the committee was able to secure a substantial grant to purchase

new trees, which was a lot of work completed by one individual but came at a perfect time to be in line with the Queen's Green Canopy project too. Created to mark Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee in 2022, the special initiative invites people from across the United Kingdom to "Plant a Tree for the Jubilee".

The fact is though, that although trees can survive for hundreds of years, ours are over 150 now, the oldest 180, and that along with disease, presents challenges. Last year a huge bough of a Beech tree dropped unexpectedly; to see it on the woodland floor it looked like a tree trunk in itself! Luckily nobody was harmed, but a fence

was damaged. Tree surgeons cut off all other branches to make it safe and what's left standing looks like a totem pole. The loss has opened up a large gap in the canopy so will be the first of 2 areas planted with new trees. Ash dieback is a disease we must watch for, and the threat



Rowan, planted Feb 2022 for the Jubilee

extends to species which rely on Ash, impacting connections between habitats and therefore, biodiversity (Woodland Trust, 2022). The cost of managing diseases can be high since it includes the practical expense of clearing up dead and dying trees plus the loss of environmental benefits (e.g., air purification). The trees are surveyed, for safety, but we still had a Redwood fall due to Storm Eunice in February.

When trees fall and insects die, decomposition returns quality to the soil. Soil is a precious thing; it holds a reservoir of water and nutrients which vegetation needs to grow. It's also a significant carbon sink and because the amount of carbon on Earth is finite, the more stored means less in the atmosphere contributing to the greenhouse effect (Onti and Schutte, 2012). Soil erosion can be a concern we try to prevent. It is caused sometimes by innocent trampling as there is no official Right of Way around the wood, but also by bike-riding; we keep an eye open to risks. Vandalism is another matter; it is rare, but it too is a cost to correct.

Once a year an event is held in the Autumn half-term to engage with local children and their families. During the covid pandemic we missed a year, but in 2021 we greeted a group varying in age from 3 to 10 years. They had fun with the bug-catching kits and some crafting, making their own creepy crawlies. In the past, the 3 nearby schools held a competition to design the new logo of the Friends group. It's been a long-term effort to inform and involve the local community.

Our website was launched in 2003, and now we also have a Facebook page and Instagram where you can see what we've been up to and check out when our next meets are. Some team members have been enjoying these sessions since the beginning, 30 odd years! But new blood is very welcome and essential to continue the good work.



The threat from development hasn't ended (The Knolls residence has already once more been assessed for converting to flats), and the future of our children and grandchildren requires that

we persist and support regeneration. A little exertion and the fresh air are great for physical and mental health, there's a certain rush of happiness to feel, being amidst the birdsong, the piney smell and the soft mulch underfoot.

Knolls Wood acts as an important link and green space in the countryside fringe around Leighton-Linslade and Heath & Reach, and it feels good to preserve it for history, conservation, recreation and environmental benefit.

Thank you for reading! We hope you enjoyed our tale and learnt one thing you didn't know before. Remember the story of the Bassett's when you visit, walking in their footsteps, and tell your friends and family about our wonderful wood. Donations and helping hands are greatly appreciated.

Peter Bassett b 10 Nov 1745 d 18 Sep 1821
Draper

John Dollin Bassett b 14 Apr 1786 d 15 Feb 1878
Draper & Banker, eldest son of above

Francis Bassett b 25 May 1820 d 09 Jun 1899
Banker, son of above

Mary Ann Bassett b 09 Sep 1853 d 16 Nov 1948
Creator of Crippled Schools, daughter of above

(Bassett Branches, 2022)

Definitions

Biodiversity – the variety of life on Earth

Atmosphere – the mass of air surrounding Earth, consisting of various gases

Greenhouse gas – a gas, example Carbon Dioxide, that contributes to a greenhouse effect on the globe by retaining heat from the sun, leading to global warming

Climate change – a long-term shift in temperature and weather, natural but also driven by human activities like burning coal and gas

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