



NORTON COMMON LOCAL NATURE RESERVE, LETCHWORTH

Norton Common lies adjacent to the Icknield Way and is proof that, although our walker's route through Letchworth is along one of the most urban stretches, a green and pleasant land is not too far away even in a town.

The Common was once entirely rural and included both arable land and grazing common. Evidence of its former use can be found in areas of undulating 'ridge-and-furrow' ground now covered in grassland and parkland plantings. Ridge and furrow was produced by ploughing furrows in the same direction each year so that soil eventually moved into ridges. This was before the development of the reversible plough which could plough in the same direction across the whole field, thus keeping the land level. In the 18th century, the land was enclosed and hedges planted to divide the fields. However, commoners continued to graze their livestock, keeping grassy areas open and providing good habitat for a wide range of species. By the end of the 19th century, grazing had declined, scrub had taken over and much of the area's characteristic wildlife had gone. In 1903, the Common was incorporated into the design of the world's first garden city at Letchworth. Paths were cleared through the scrub, a lido was constructed for the people of the town and other facilities added as the years passed.

Today, the Common comprises 63 acres of mixed woodland, scrub, parkland and grassland where paths meander. Interesting and locally important wildlife habitats still survive including an area of marshy grassland created by springs seeping through impermeable boulder clay. Here in summer you can find marsh orchids, meadow cranesbill and several species of dragonfly. Old meadow land north of the swimming pool still supports cowslips, lady's bedstraw, harebells and wild carrot. The nature reserve is managed by North Hertfordshire District Council in partnership with a local Friends group and, in recent years, a great deal of conservation work has helped to restore some of the habitats in this attractive and peaceful place. If time permits when on your walk along the Way, Norton Common is worth stopping at to eat your picnic – and, maybe, spot a black squirrel!

For more information, go to: <https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/environment-and-planning/countryside-management-service-%E2%80%93-places-to-visit/places-to-visit/norton-common-leaflet.pdf>