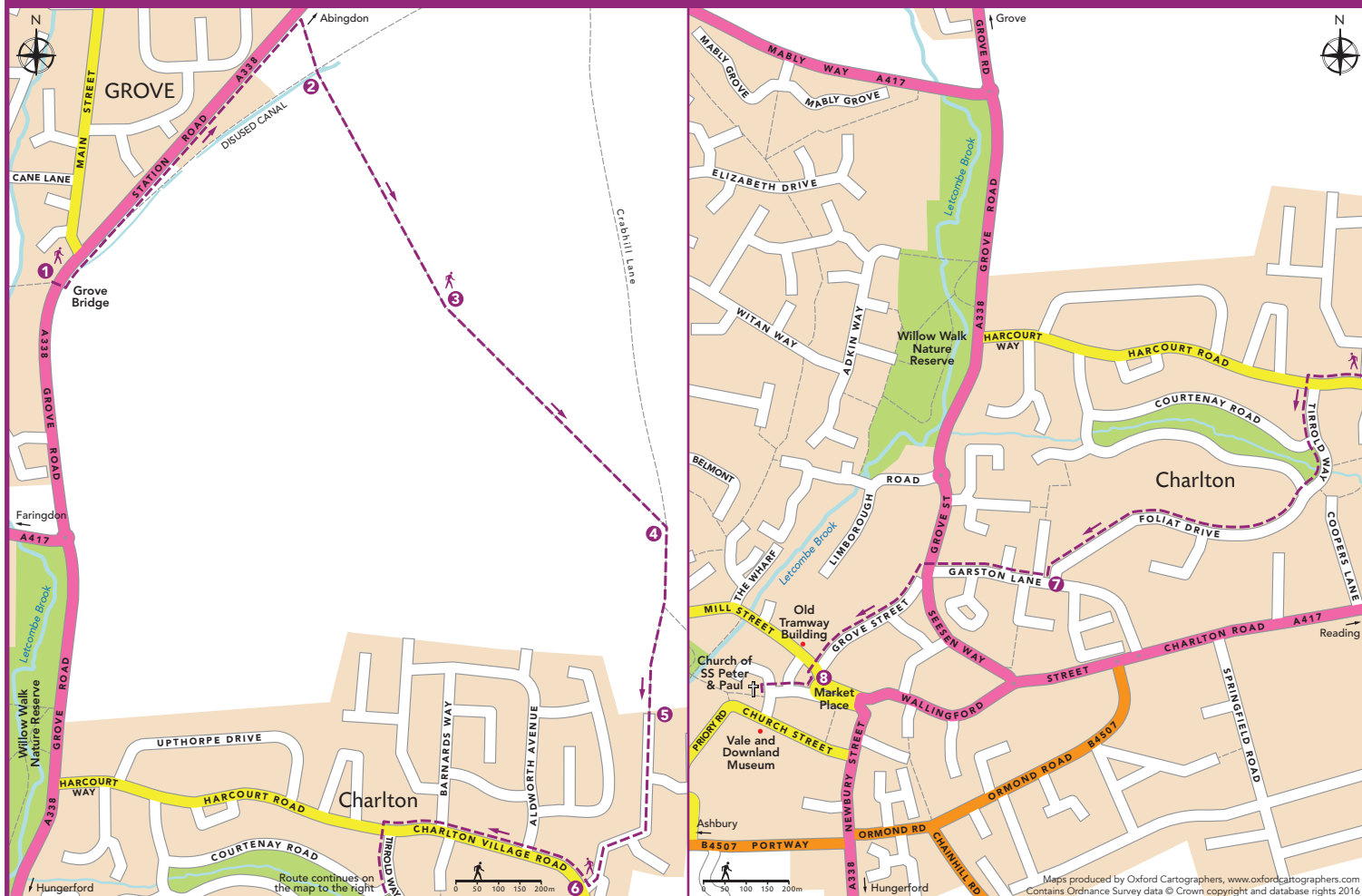


## WANTAGE AREA WALKS & CYCLE ROUTES



### Route 2 - The Dudley Iles Nature Trail Part 2: Grove Bridge via Crab Hill to Wantage

This trail was inaugurated in 1991 on the occasion of the official twinning of Wantage and Grove with Mably in France. This part of the trail should be read in conjunction with Route 1, and extends it to a walk of around 1½ hours. It picks up at waymark 8 on route 1. Some of this route may be muddy dependent on weather conditions.

**1** Starting at Grove Bridge by the traffic lights follow the pavement up the Oxford road for 500 metres. You are following the line of the canal. You will pass a line of cottages beyond the canal on the right. The old towpath passes through their back gardens as these used to be canal workers cottages. There are two new kissing gates at each end of the paddock but it is difficult to follow this path which is rather overgrown in parts. Look for a footpath sign on the right through the hedge and cross the footbridge over the old canal.



**2** Turn right to the end of the ploughed fields. The right of way goes directly across the field under the telegraph poles, but if it is impossible,



go round two sides to the hole in the hedge at the top of the field.

Red-legged Partridge. Heavy game birds which you might disturb. These "French" partridges were introduced several times into Britain for sport. They are now successful and are often commoner than our own grey partridges.

**3** Follow the yellow arrows across the "lane" and fields to the top of the field and the view of the local countryside.

To the northwest is the largely flat fertile "Vale of White Horse". The Thames and Oxford lie

to the North. The Vale is largely a countryside of green fields with cattle, or wheat and barley, hedgerows and scattered copses (preserve for pheasant cover or commercial forestry).



Some of this land is now being used for solar farms, with a view to providing sustainable energy, and you will see one here.

To the north beyond Grove village is the railway joining London with the west and Wales. To the south is Wantage with the Downs beyond. The fields you are crossing are typical of modern "monoculture" a monotonous crop of cereals with few examples of wild flowers. Hedges are few and the countryside less interesting.

**4** This area is known as Crab Hill. You should now come to an old green lane. There are still some of the old hedges which once lined the green lane.



Green Lane near Charlton

Hedges have not always formed the boundaries to local fields. By mediaeval times the open field system of farming was slowly changing to smaller units. By the 16th/17th century, fields were enclosed for more profitable sheep and arable farming. Clues to the age of a hedge lie in the number of hedge plants: the greater the number, the older the hedge. These hedges provide winter night shelter for continental blackbirds and other thrushes as well as our local birds. The autumn hip and haw berries and seeds provide food for finches, tits, warblers and thrushes. The hedges are also important for nesting birds away from magpies. They provide flight lines so that wayside birds can find their way safely into gardens and parks for the winter.

**5** Follow the green lane south. Soon you will reach the first houses. This high area is called Charlton Heights. Opposite No. 1 Quelches Row is a bush of "Duke of Argyll's tea plant". A certain Duke received a real tea bush and this shrub from a friend at the same time. He got the labels mixed up hence its name.



Duke of Argyll's tea plant

**6** Follow the road to the right after you pass a small church. You will pass the Charlton Primary School on the left. Then take the second left (Tirrold Way) down the hill and up the other side



Charlton Church

into Foliat Drive. You will pass through part of the estate built for the Atomic Energy Authority employees in the 1950s. Note the open landscaping of the small stream (Humber Ditch) which flows west into Letcombe brook.

**7** Continue until you meet a T-junction, turn right along Garston Lane passing the site of the former Garston Lane primary school on the left, now a small housing estate - Chapel Close, cross the main road by the pedestrian lights and walk along Grove Street down the hill and up to Wantage Market Place.

Flying over the town you may see a number of birds hawking for insects. Swifts - From the end of the first week in May swifts are common, particularly on clear days around the old part of the town. These were once called "Devil birds" perhaps because of their dark appearance and screaming call. They spend almost all their lives on the wing-feeding, sleeping, mating and collecting nesting material. Swallows and Martins - common from mid-April to October. House Martins are more common here and have a white patch above the tail. They build mud nests on the side of buildings whilst the longer tailed swallows build a mud nest inside buildings. Both need open fields and water over which they catch flying insects.

**8** Continue across the edge of the square and take the second left (Signposted Museum and Church) and proceed to the churchyard once more.



Parish Church of SS Peter and Paul

The Parish Church of SS Peter and Paul - mentioned in the Domesday Book, but the present building dates from the 13th century. The great east window above the main altar is 19th century and is a memorial to William Trinder. The west window is a memorial to Rev. Dean Butler, the vicar of Wantage from 1847 to 1880. He is particularly renowned for his commitment to education, and founded the community of St Mary the Virgin, the largest community for women in the Anglican church. Grave stones - Examine the headstones in the church yard. You will see grey, green and orange patches of Lichens on them. Lichens consist of microscopic fungal threads (like the body of a toadstool) and very tiny green plants. The green plants provide the food and the fungal threads protect them and provide water and salts. Their growth is very slow and they live a very long time - some have been growing on their respective stones since soon after they were erected. Lichens are sensitive to air pollution so good lichen growth on walls suggests clean air.

The orange-yellow encrusting lichen is found commonly on Wantage roofs. They are bright orange in the sun but green-yellow in the shadier places. Some kinds are spread by birds' feet hence they are concentrated along house ridges or tree branches. The orange pigment can be used as a cloth dye.

Now you have completed the walk, why not visit the museum on the opposite side of Priory Road where you will find a welcoming cafe.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to the birth place of King Alfred.



Vale & Downland Museum

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Further copies of this route and others in the series are available from the Independent Advice Centre, Market Square, Wantage