



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about BLUEBELLS

One of the delights of a woodland walk on a sunny April day is the sweet scent wafting from the massed flowers of the English bluebell. One of our best-loved wildflowers, with half of the world's population found in the UK, it is typically associated with ancient woodlands but can also occur at the base of long-established hedgerows. Needing sunlight, their spring flowers appear before the overhead leaves develop.



The narrow glossy leaves and flower spikes are produced from deeply rooted bulbs supported by specialised symbiotic fungi. The flowers are a deep violet-blue, but sometimes white or pink spikes occur. In sunny patches there may be up to 20 flowers per spike arising from a mature bulb. The flowers are narrow, tubular-bell shaped, with tips that curl backwards, and the pollen is cream-coloured. They are arranged on one side of a drooping stem.



After pollination by honeybees and other insects many green capsules form, holding large numbers of ripe black seeds. The seeds are shaken from the capsules by breezes or by animals running through the woods.

The introduced and invasive Spanish bluebell has much broader leaves than the native English bluebell. Its pale blue, unscented flowers are arranged all around the upright stem and are more open revealing blue pollen, not cream. Encouragingly, recent research has found that the native species has a genetic advantage due to the sheer weight of numbers and greater fertility and so should continue to thrive.

Historically, the sticky sap from the bluebell was used to glue feathers onto arrows. When ruffs were a vital fashion accessory, bluebell bulbs were crushed to make starch to stiffen these intricate status symbols. Along with many other plant species, tests are being carried out into their biochemical potential for the manufacture of drugs to alleviate or cure a range of human diseases.

Finding a bluebell in flower is seen as a harbinger of spring. Interestingly a line in an unfinished poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins reads: *'Of bluebells sheaved in May'* indicating that 140 years ago May was the usual month to see them in their full glory. Now, with warmer springs, they are at their peak in April although some years see flowering as early as March.

Bluebell leaves are damaged by trampling so please do not tread on them when admiring or photographing this wonderful spring extravaganza. The bluebell is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). This means digging up the plant or bulb in the countryside is prohibited and landowners are prohibited from removing bluebells from their land to sell.

Birchanger Wood's bluebells were being trampled underfoot until 3 miles of well-surfaced paths were installed a few years ago. Now, the bluebells and other native woodland flowers are flourishing again. About a mile of walk number 144 follows some of these paths as they meander through the ancient woodland.

Just south and east of Much Hadham, a well-used and generally well-surfaced stretch of the Hertfordshire Way runs for about a mile along the Ash valley through Mill Wood and Sidehill Wood, each of which has an extensive display in April or May. The bluebells spread up the hillside to give a spectacular presentation. This footpath is included within Hundred Parishes walk number 172 and also the considerably longer station walk number 20.



Another bluebell spectacle can usually be seen in Howe Wood in Littlebury. The wood is private but there are clear views of the extensive bluebell coverage from Strehall Road as it crosses over the M11 motorway. The first photograph in this article was taken there.

The parish of Quendon and Rickling has several bluebell woods. They are the main focus of 2-mile walk number 183 and are also visited during station walk number 4 and circular walk number 148.



Almost every ancient wood within the Hundred Parishes has bluebells; others of note are Turners Spring in Burton End, Stansted Mountfitchet, Hazel End Wood in Farnham, Alsa Woods in Elsenham and Garnett's Wood in High Easter. We would like to hear of others that should be added to this list – please use the Feedback form on www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.