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THIS MONTH'S HIGHLIGHTS

Looking for hidden gems

IMAGES: Ann Priest

If you love doing crosswords and taking long walks, then this combination of a bit of a mental challenge and a ramble in some of the loveliest countryside in England is probably the sort of day out that will appeal.

The very phrase 'treasure hunt' evokes childhood memories of exciting searches, usually with a prize at the end but, up until now, the usual way to embark on a grown-up foray was to commission an events company to create one for you, (costing well into three figures) or to go to the trouble of setting your own, which many people simply do not have the time or inclination to do.

So, when [Treasuredays.com](#) creator Luise Fraser contacted Berkshire & Chilterns Life to tell us about her new launch, thinking it was just the sort of day out that would appeal to our readers, we thought we just had to give it a go.

Armed with a good map and a sturdy pair of walking boots, Sandra Carter set off on the car-based Chilterns Villages Treasure Hunt, with the route running through some of the area's most picturesque villages and lanes including Fingest, Frieth, Christmas Common, Turville and Hambleden. Here is an account of her day.

I've lived in the Chilterns for many years and this route certainly takes in some of the loveliest, tucked-away places, past rose-clad country cottages, timeless churches and welcoming village pubs. Although we followed the route of the [Treasuredays](#) map, I shan't be giving out any clues here, as that would only spoil it for anyone wanting to complete the hunt themselves. Instead we'll just ask you to follow us as we go exploring.

Watlington

My photographer companion Ann Priest and I began our journey in the historic market town of Watlington, just inside the Oxfordshire border. A signpost at the town centre directs you to the car park just to the east. We walked back to the old brick town hall on the main road where traffic squeezes through the former market square. The town is backed by a steep hillside, a favourite for kite-flyers, ramblers and picnickers. Locals will tell you that the strange triangle cut into the hillside chalk represents the church tower they couldn't afford to build: from a certain spot in the village, the triangle is seen where the tower should be.

Watlington to Christmas Common (2 miles)

From the car park we continued by car on the road east from Watlington. After two miles we turned right at a T-junction, then after 100 yards left at a signpost to Northend, parking in a layby on our right. We walked the 50 yards back to the junction and turned left to reach the Fox and Hounds at the centre of this little hamlet. Christmas Common is so named because it was the scene of a Civil War truce in 1643, enabling both sides to celebrate Christmas.

Christmas Common to Turville (3 miles)

After a stop for photographs, we returned to the car and continued on the road to the little hamlet of Northend, then followed road signs to Turville (not Turville Heath). Part of the route is a lovely ancient lane, sunken amid the surrounding beech woods through generations of use. You'll want to linger in the picture-postcard village of Turville, complete with its green, beautiful church, sweet cottages and the old Bull and Butcher pub. It's overlooked by the windmill on the hilltop, made famous in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Turville itself is a veteran film star – the set for *Midsomer Murders*, *Miss Marple*, *Vicar of Dibley*, *Goodnight Mr Tom* and many more. It's hard to credit this tranquil village's link with murder. Many episodes of *Midsomer Murders* and *Miss Marple* were set here, and locals enjoyed working as film extras. Their perfect rose-clad cottages, outwardly unchanged for centuries, have featured in many films over the years.

One older couple propping up the bar in the village pub told me how living here, while wonderful, means putting up with the occasional coach-load of film fans looking round the sets. *Midsomer Murders* was screened in more than 100 countries so fans come from far and wide.

Their home, Sleepy Cottage, was the set for the TV film *Goodnight Mr Tom*. "People come and press their noses against my window pane," the wife said. "My husband waves, but I sometimes get so fed up I press my nose against it too from the



Above: Sandra Carter



Above: The old village pump at Hambleden



Above: The village shop in Hambleden



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Chilterns chic, plus quirky and unique, equals a great day's

inside. They soon move on.”

If you avoid the film fans, you may find yourself visiting Turville along with the animals. On St Francis's Day villagers bring their pets – everything from goats and horses to rabbits, white mice and cats – to the village green to be blessed by the priest. The Vicar of Dibley – also set here – picked up on this tradition but it long predated the TV series.

The pub, the Bull and Butcher, has been offering refreshment for centuries. It was built in 1550 as a house, but in 1617 when men working on the church threatened to lay down tools if no refreshments were provided, a license was issued so that the house's owner could supply ale and food. And the pub was born – known first as the Bullen Butcher – Bullen being the original spelling of Ann Boleyn's name, and Butcher referring to her husband Henry who had her despatched.

We enjoyed a coffee at a glass-topped table in the bar through which we could see a very deep well, discovered when the pub was extended in 1999.

Turville to Fingest (1 mile)

We continued through Turville and at the T-junction at the approach to Fingest village, we turned left to park near the church, which has an unusual Norman tower with twin roofs. It's overlooked by The Chequers pub and the flower-decked cottage gardens of villagers.

How we would have loved to meet Mary Mole, 'widow of Fingest', who 'gave by will dated 1731, three pounds per year for ever, out of the estate called 'Vining', to be distributed to widows and other poor people of the parish'.

Mary is just one of the personalities you'll find recorded in the church at Fingest. It's a narrow building with an unusual Norman twin-roofed tower at the heart of this tiny village of pretty cottages, rose-festooned flint walls and aged wonky rooflines that you fear may produce a big repair bill some time soon.

Fingest to Frieth (2 miles)

We retraced our route to the T-junction and bore left to pass through Skirmett. It's little more than a one-street hamlet with wonderful old houses like Crooked Chimney Cottage, gardens bursting with roses and hollyhocks, and sad reminders of a thriving past. The church, post office, vicarage and barns are all smart private homes. There's no pavement so tread carefully as you make your way to The Frog, a delightful whitewashed, rose-clad pub with an unusual weeping ash in the beer garden. A circular bench around its trunk invites you to sit in its shade as you sample the quirky guest beers.

At the end of Skirmett, where the road turns sharply right, we took the road left signposted Frieth. This narrow and winding, so take care.

Set in the heart of Frieth, next to the village school, is the pretty Church of St John the Evangelist. Local farmers carted wagonloads of flints to build it in 1848, using the ruined wing of the old rectory at Hambleton, so that parishioners wouldn't have so far to walk to the parish church at Hambleton.

It's beautiful inside as well as out, with radiant Victorian stained glass and decorative wooden features carved by local craftsmen.

Frieth to Lane End (1.5 miles)

We continued through Frieth where the road lead to the large, comparatively bustling village of Lane End. After passing its church on the left, we reached a T-junction with the main road signposted High Wycombe to the right and Cadmore End to the left. We parked near this point to visit the two village ponds.

Lane End to Hambleton (4 miles)

Then it was back to Frieth the way we had come, driving through the village past the Yew Tree pub and church. We followed a winding road signposted to Hambleton. The village is another popular film set. Unlike so many villages built in a long line along the Chiltern ridges, this has a real heart to it: a great chestnut tree in the centre with the old village pump alongside, and the church, pub, village hall and – unusually – a thriving village store all round.

Its Jacobean-style manor house was built in 1603 of flint and stone – like the church and most of the cottages – and is an imposing building in large grounds. Charles I stayed here overnight in 1646 while fleeing from Oxford and Lord Cardigan, who led the Charge of the Light Brigade, was born here in 1797. Influential in a different way was a later lord of the manor, W H Smith the bookseller, who was church warden and often played the church organ.

My favourite spot in this beautifully kept 14th-century church is the alabaster memorial to Sir Cope d'Oyley and his wife, 'who lived together in inviolated bonds of holy wedlock 22 years, and multiplied themselves into five sons and five daughters'. The carved group shows the parents and all ten children.

There's also a lady chapel with a finely painted triptych behind its altar. We were told that this little chapel used to be called The Sheepfold as it was fitted out with wooden benches and straw on the floor, for the use of farm workers. No straw today, everyone is welcome. You could do a Hassock Trail around these village churches, as most of them are full of beautifully designed and cross-stitched kneelers, and they are usually open for visitors.

Villagers tend to be friendly folk and happy to share their stories. One man coming from Hambleton's village shop stopped to tell us that Cromwell passed this way and shot "bullets" into the east wall of the church, "but didn't knock it down as he was in a hurry – you can see the holes." Sadly, we couldn't find them. Nor did we find any rubies, diamonds or gold on our Chilterns treasure hunt. But what we did come across were some real hidden gems that are well worth seeking out – nuggets of fascinating information about the past and priceless views of the



Above: The Old Parsonage in Frieth



Above: A snapshot of the past in Fingest village



Above: A rose-clad cottage in Turville



Above: Church Cottage in Turville, as featured in Miss Marple, the Murder at the Vicarage episode



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Chilterns. Now that's what I call a real treasure hunt.

What to take

You'll need a good map to make the most of your Chilterns exploration. In the past, before surfaced roads opened them up, villages hidden in these valleys far from major routes were difficult to access. That's why they remain so beautifully unspoilt – but the roads are often as winding and narrow as ever.

Once there you're likely to get tempted to explore on foot, so it's wise to take some walking shoes. This is perfect rambling country, after all. At Turville it's hard to resist the steep climb up the hill to the windmill overlooking the village, giving wonderful views. At Hambleden, a pleasant one-mile meadow walk takes you to Hambleden Lock and a lovely stretch of the River Thames.

Picnics spots abound, or you may like to sample one of the village pubs. Most retain their historical charm while offering upmarket fare alongside real ales.

WIN! A Chilterns Treasure Hunt for you and your friends and family. We have FIVE to give away, worth £25 each, courtesy of TreasureDays.com

Competition closes: September 30, 2008 (See Competitions our page)



Above: The Bull and Butcher pub in Turville



Above: Cobstone windmill overlooks Turville village



Above: The Chilterns trail starts in the pretty town of Watlington



Above: Hambleden – the village with a real heart



Above: The church at Hambleden

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